

Farm Talk

by
Jerry Webb

For years farmers have been trying to tell their story to the nonfarm public. Serious public relations efforts were made in the mid- and late 60's to tell consumers why there were surpluses and why farmers needed better laws to help them attain income equity.

For the most part well-fed urbanites listened but did nothing about the farmer's "problem". Food was a bargain, incomes were fairly high compared to the cost of most things and no one had even dreamed of a fuel crisis.

Surveys across the country in the 60's showed that consumers liked farmers, thought they were honest and hardworking, would them-

selves like to live in the country someday, but wouldn't want to live on a farmer's income.

They also disliked government programs aimed at boosting farm incomes. And even though it was pointed out time and time again, the urban dweller never understood or accepted the fact that government money spent keeping agriculture healthy and productive was being returned manifold at the supermarket checkout counter. And so the carefree 60's came and went with no real inconveniences for most of us except a small war and some civil unrest. Farmers were struggling to make ends meet but there was nothing unusual about that and so nothing was done to solve some of their problems except talk.

Agriculture spokesman talked about the need for a healthy agriculture. Farmers talked about how they worked day and night for a dollar or less an hour. The Agriculture Department talked about food being a bargain, and the politicians just talked.

I remember one of those blue-sky guys talking about what was going to happen to agriculture once the Vietnam war ended and we got at the business of trying to feed the hungry people of the world.

He talked about the boom years ahead for farmers, the world demand and soaring prices for farm goods. He talked about a five year time-table that would see farmers through the surpluses and depressed prices and into an almost utopia where those who were able to make it through the wringer would have good times.

Well, the good times came and went. He didn't predict that. And farmers didn't think about that. So taking their cue from the good

times prediction, they expanded, bought land and machinery and went into debt.

Then about 1980 the good times went away and it doesn't look like they're coming back - at least not for several more years. And farmers are once again in the midst of a crisis.

Farmers have had so many crises for many years that people have trouble identifying the real ones. The cry for better farm prices sounds no different than previous cries by dairymen, cattlemen, wheat farmers, broilermen and so on down the list of commodity groups. What's any different about this crisis compared to the one a few years ago when farmers poured their milk in the streets, or the time poultrymen broke eggs and smothered chicks!

And looking way back, didn't farmers plow under crops and bury baby pigs in an effort to improve farm prices in the midst of another crisis?

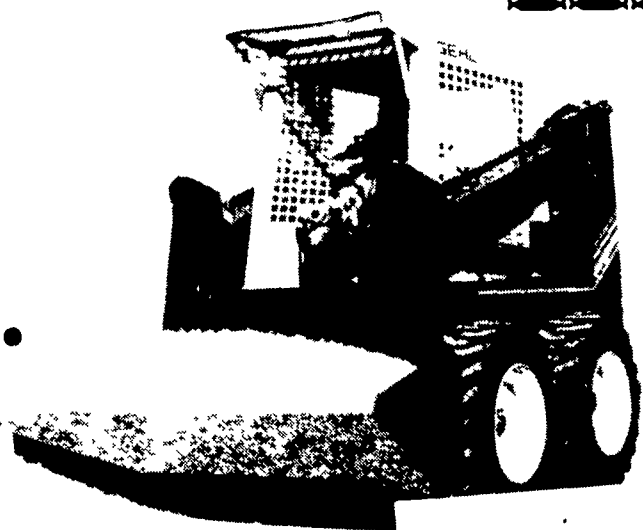
The present farm crisis is in full bloom at the precise time when Congress must write a new farm bill. That exaggerates everything and leaves the lawmakers with an impossible task.

The farm crisis is as simple as about 25 percent too much farm output. It's also as complicated as what to do to reduce production without increasing retail food costs and putting thousands of farmers off the land.

The farm crisis defies a simple solution. Anyone who says it doesn't isn't paying attention.

Congress will write a new farm bill, I'm confident of that. But I don't think anything that even suggests a solution to the farm problem will occur.

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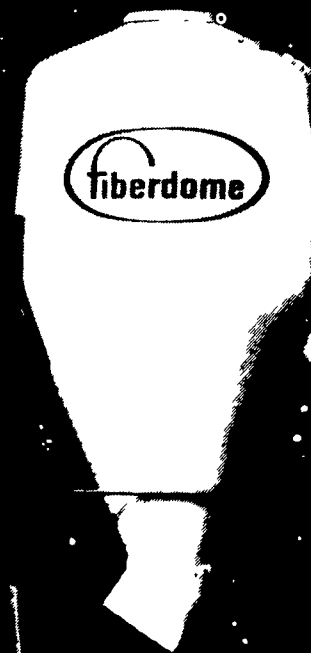
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