

THE PUBLIC MUST UNDERSTAND AGRICULTURE

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"Where will my next meal come from? That's a silly question!" you say. "We have plenty of food in this country." Yes, we do have plenty of food. But we may not always have it. Even today, two of every three human beings in the world do not get enough to eat. And the situation may get even worse ...

Food is produced by farmers, of course, and at one time just about everybody in the United States was a farmer. Today less than 10 per cent of our people are engaged in farming as a source of livelihood. They produce all the food needed for themselves and for the other 90 per cent of us, as well as some for export -- and still there's a surplus left.

Obviously the modern farmer is much more efficient than the farmer of 100 or even 25 years ago. He uses new tools, new machinery, new methods and more plant food -- so that one farmer today can feed himself and 23 other persons. The rise in farm efficiency in the past two decades has not been matched by any other major industry.

In the United States today, a smaller proportion of our working force is needed to feed and clothe our people than in any other major country of the world. Manpower released from farm work has been free to construct better homes, better automobiles, better highways and schools, and other things that give us our high standard of living. This is not possible in other countries such as Russia, where one farmer feeds himself and only three to five others.

Farm efficiency will continue to increase, for the next few years at any rate. There are limits, though, to the quantity of food that an acre of land will produce -- and some day we may approach those limits. The amount of land available in this country for food production is pretty well fixed, although some additional acreage can be made productive through irrigation and similar projects.

Meanwhile, our population is expanding at the rate of more than $2\frac{1}{2}$ million persons a year. Think of that! Every two years the United States adds the population equivalent of another North Carolina -- with almost a million to spare.

There now are about 180 million people in America. Within 15 years there will be some 230 million. Within 40 years our population will double! In practical terms this means that land available per person for food production in America will be reduced by one-half in the next four decades.

On a worldwide scale, even more serious problems loom. The earth's population took 50 centuries to reach a billion but only one century for the second billion. Only 35 years is being required for the third billion, which we've almost reached.

If future Americans are to be well fed and well clothed, we need to do everything possible to promote a sound, strong agriculture. This will require the active interest and support of the 90 per cent of our people who are non-farmers as well as the 10 per cent who are engaged in farm work.

Agriculture has been going through a technological revolution -- a period calling for severe adjustments by farmers. Increased efficiency has brought two kinds of surplus -- first, a surplus of human labor on the farm; second, a surplus of agricultural commodities. The steady migration of farm people to city and town has been underway for at least 100 years and is still going on -- North Carolina lost 77,000 farms between 1950 and 1959 -- yet there still are more workers on farms than are needed, and many of them can't find suitable employment elsewhere. A great social and economic upheaval is underway, and its impact has been so far-reaching as to merit the serious concern of our government.

As for the surplus of agricultural commodities, this has been good for consumers but bad for farmers. Why? Because even a small surplus will bring lower prices.

Farmers have high fixed costs -- land, tractors, machinery and other equipment, and so on. When they receive a lower price per pound or bushel, they try to maintain their income by producing more pounds or bushels. So the surpluses get bigger and prices drop even lower.

Farmers face many uncertainties in their business -- weather, diseases, insects, and so on. To add further to their problems, they are largely unorganized. There are only a few major companies producing steel. But there are about 3 3/4 million farmers, each making his own decisions and running his own business. No single farmer can do much about changing the supply of food and fiber coming to market. Producers of major commodities are not well enough organized to control the market, and for this reason farmers over the years have had to take whatever price they could get at the market place.

Yet the public interest demands that we have a strong, sound agriculture to produce an adequate supply of food and fiber for the needs of ourselves and our allies. That's why our government has stepped in and tried to assist in maintaining a sound agriculture.

Some of our price support programs, such as tobacco, have cost the government very little if anything. Other such programs could be made just as effective.

Even with government programs, farmers receive only about four per cent of the national income -- although they make up approximately 10 per cent of the population.

Including government payments, the rental value of farm buildings, and the value of food items produced and consumed at home, the average farm resident receives an income only about one-half as large as that of the average non-farmer.

Farmers feel they are entitled to a better deal than this. To make ends meet, in the face of lower prices and rising costs, hundreds of thousands of them have been forced to take part-time jobs off the farm. Surely the business of producing food and fiber -- the basic needs of our everyday existence -- should

be able to "pay its own way." Surely farmers deserve a better economic reward than they have received in the past.

One of the greatest challenges facing America is this: Can we develop an economic system in which the farmer, who produces the raw materials for the food we eat and the clothes we wear, will be justly rewarded for his investment, his management ability, and his labor? Thus far we have failed in this challenge.

What can you do to help? There are several things.

First, take an active interest in public policies affecting agriculture. The future of agriculture is just as important to the nation as a whole as it is to farmers.

Second, tell your friends the facts about American agriculture. Remind them that we are the best fed and best clothed people in the history of the world. Tell them, too, that food prices today are just as reasonable as other prices -- if not more so -- especially in view of the improved quality and the built-in maid services that we get.

Third, support federal and state programs for agricultural research and education. These programs are in the public interest -- they are necessary for a continuing abundance of food and fiber.

Finally, support programs for wise use and conservation of our soil and water resources. Again, the public interest demands this. Unless we are good stewards and protect our precious soil and water, future generations will go hungry because of our failure.

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