

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

Bergland to 'restructure' agriculture

Ignoring conventional wisdom," the Agriculture Secretary is planning a great leap backward for America's high-technology agrobusiness.

The coincidence last week of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's announcement that farm prices plunged 4.5 percent in April and Secretary Bergland's public discussion of plans to "restructure" American agriculture ought not to be laid to chance. The price collapse, led by livestock, wheat and corn, was no surprise to producers who have been warning of this kind of development and its implications for months. If the price trend persists, it will break the back of the farm sector.

Freed of the demagoguery of protecting the "family farm," what Bergland presented to newsmen at the conclusion of nation-wide hearings on the "future of American agriculture" is a description of what the farm sector will look like after the damage has been done.

The drop in 1980 net farm income is now expected to be more like 25 percent; not the 20 percent predicted five months ago. A net income drop of such magnitude will have a direct and more intense impact on one third of the nation's farm units—the larger farms that have from \$200,000 to \$100,000 and over in annual sales, and that produce nearly 90 percent of the total American farm product. A 20 percent drop in net income overall will hit these large units with a rate of collapse of net money-income of up to 38 percent.

Predominantly the large, modern corporate family farms, these

units account for the bulk of total cash receipts from farm marketings and more than 70 percent of the outstanding debt in the farm sector. But they enjoy only a very tiny portion of the "off-farm" and "nonmoney" income flows that give the small actually marginal farm units the flexibility to "absorb" significant losses.

It is in this context that Secretary Bergland announced in an interview with UPI Farm Editor Sonja Hillgren last week that he would like to "limit farm size."

Bergland counterposes his thinking to the "conventional wisdom" that would dictate maximization of economies of scale and a high-technology, capital intensive approach to meeting growing world food needs.

As he outlined it to a group of embassy agricultural attachés last Dec. 10, Bergland is guided instead by "harsh new realities" that place "limits" on increasing food production. Predictably, these realities feature precisely the tight money, fuel shortages, and limited hopes for major new production technology breakthroughs—not to mention the higher costs of these "shrinking elements," land, money energy, water and technology—that Carter's Trilateral administration policy have brought us.

To the "resource constraints" Bergland adds another stock environmentalist lament: the "damage" done by "indiscriminate use

of fertilizers and pesticides."

He rounds out his Malthusian vision with the assertion that large U.S. farms have already reached the size of "optimum production efficiency."

Finally, Bergland states the crux of the scheme: "Indeed, some suspect," he states, "that smaller operations may be better able to adapt to the new resource constraints than the larger farms."

In the May 2 interview, Bergland told UPI that studies on economies of scale were being updated to find optimum levels of efficiency. The consequent farm size limit, he added, would not be determined by output or income, but "it would be a farm large enough to keep a family employed." The farm size limit would be readily enforced, Bergland said, by revamping the federal farm programs to make limited farm size a criterion of eligibility!

The picture painted by Bergland, an on the record admirer of the energy "efficiency" of Chinese agriculture, is clear enough. He emphasized that he expected his efforts to result in encouraging farmers—with federal help—to "diversify their crops and livestock as they used to do before farmers specialized in one or two crops or one kind of animal."

Isn't it time to blow the whistle on Chairman Bergland? He has engaged a bevy of thinktankers on this, with the explicit purpose of using it as a vehicle to spread "structure consciousness"—jabberwocky for Malthusianism—throughout the farm sector. He has even marshaled the otherwise staunchly traditional progressive legions of the Agriculture Department to participate.