

# Dryland farm plan threatens Western states

by Susan B. Cohen

Is it an accident that this spring and summer—while Montana and the Dakotas were suffering a prolonged and devastating drought that caused billions of dollars worth of damage to agriculture and drove many crop and livestock producers out of business and off the land—President Carter refused requests for a Presidential declaration of emergency and financial aid? Instead he took the occasion to award a \$250 million loan guarantee to developers of a \$1.5 billion coal gasification plant in North Dakota.

In the view of an influential think-tank spokesman interviewed this week, the energy-versus-agriculture conflict in the West will “of course” be solved by the exit of agriculture from the West.

It is well known that the Carter administration has pitted energy developers against agriculture for Western water supplies. Less recognized is the fact that a conspiracy is well under way to settle the matter against agriculture long before the fight starts.

## Irrigation under attack

Dryland farming—now being aggressively advocated—is farming without irrigation. In the eastern United States, where rainfall is generally dependable and adequate in quantity, so-called dryland farming is the norm. West of the Mississippi, in the otherwise fertile High Plains running north-south from Montana and the Dakotas through Texas, rainfall is erratic and averages only 12 to 22 inches per year.

Plains states’ agriculture, which annually produces more than \$20 billion worth of crops and livestock, rests on irrigation, principally the development of underground water resources in the Ogallala aquifer. The implications of irrigation are striking: In Texas, for example, where without irrigation corn could not be grown at all, an irrigated acre can yield 180 bushels of

corn compared to average national yields of 100 bushels per acre.

The 1980 drought, centering as it has in the southern High Plains, especially Texas, has occasioned an outpouring of commentaries on the “water crisis,” on the one hand, and on the other, the growing trend toward dryland farming. It is scarcely by mistake that Agriculture Secretary Bergland appointed a man opposed to irrigation as his chief drought aid coordinator. Upon appointment, Roger Sandman promptly told the press, “We’ve gotten awfully irrigation-crazy in the last few years. Water is not an unlimited resource.”

In the Texas High Plains generally, an Interior Department study projects a 45 percent drop in irrigated acreage by the year 2000—provided that water conservation meanwhile cuts water use by 20 percent. By the same time, according to the study, irrigation in western Kansas will have dried up. Although many environmental seers, such as Resources for the Future, expect an increase in irrigated agriculture in the West overall in the next ten years, they point to the more vulnerable Southern Plains, where the dryland trend is most advanced, as the wave of the future which will become an avalanche by 1990.

## Cost-cutting hurts productivity

The “limited inputs” dryland farming method is widely celebrated despite the fact that it significantly reduces productivity, and thus gives the lie to its alleged cost-effectiveness. There is little doubt that producers themselves are being driven to this regressive accommodation to nature by a policy which has forced them to produce at below cost of production since the early 1950s. “We’ll run out of money before we run out of water,” is the way one producer put it.

Energy costs have pushed irrigation charges through the roof. In the Oklahoma Panhandle, for instance, natural gas prices have tripled in the past two years. An area U.S. Soil Conservation Service official estimates that it costs about \$70,000 to irrigate a half-section, or 320 acres of land, today—when you add up the cost of purchasing pipe, a sprinkler, laying an electrical line and drilling a 300-foot well.

Similarly, a Texas High Plains producer who closed down four irrigation wells last year because they had lost 25 percent of their capacity in the last five years plans to reduce irrigation even further on his 220-acre farm because of the drought. He is looking forward to saving \$150 per month in electricity bills, and *hopes* that he won’t lose more than 10 percent of his yield.

The demoralization and cynicism fueled by these developments was expressed in the remarks of one Kansas farmer to the *Wall Street Journal* recently. “Maybe we overdeveloped the area beyond its real potential,” he said. “Maybe we can’t maintain this

standard of living." The abandonment of irrigation will sorely impact the whole economy of these regions where much manufacture and commerce is based on supplying high-technology agriculture.

A host of polemics has been marshaled in defense of the dryland trend. The avowedly Malthusian *Christian Science Monitor* has recently rehabilitated John Wesley Powell, a 19th-century propagandist against Western development. Powell argued against the railroad builders and land developers—whose slogan was "Rain follows the plow"—that the West should properly be named the Great American Desert and that it was unfit for agriculture or settlement at all. The 1980 drought, said the *Monitor*, proves that Wesley was right.

Then there is the argument made by Dr. David Campbell of President Carter's Water Resources Council—headed by Interior Secretary Andrus and opposed to water development—that the new dryland farmer benefits not only by cutting pumping costs, but also by reducing his vulnerability to drought. As shown in Texas, the country's third largest agricultural state, that is a lie: the dryland operations were wiped out first and most thoroughly this year. More basically, the dryland operation will tend to blow away with the wind for obvious reasons.

It is ironic, and illustrative, that the same environmentalists advocating a reversion to dryland farming are now jumping on the "soil conservation" bandwagon, scolding producers for not preventing soil erosion on their land and in some cases arguing that farmers are incompetent to take care of their land and that therefore should be taken from them to be administered as a "public trust."

The environmentalists view irrigation in any case as a squandering of limited resources. More sophisticated Malthusian propagandists argue that since irrigated agriculture consumes larger quantities of water per unit of output than any other economic sector, it qualifies as a "low-value," and therefore wasteful, use. These individuals cheer the "effective restraints" on water use for agriculture that have begun to be imposed by the high cost of energy for pumping. Some, like the Rand Corporation, echo the earlier proposals of Professor Milton Friedman in this regard. Rand, in a just-completed three-year study of California water use, advocates the establishment of a "water market" where water would be bought and sold according to the highest bidder.

### **The goals and the record**

What all of this adds up to is an unambiguous campaign in which austerity economics, water policy and land policy are being wielded in concert to severely delimit if not shut down altogether Western agriculture.

The land and water are to be delivered to the Carter administration's synfuel boondoggle; farm producers are being delivered to bankruptcy court.

Review the record.

- During its first year in office, the Carter administration established its opposition to Western water resources development with the famous "hit list" of 18 water projects targeted for termination. Twelve have already died, and there is currently a \$38 billion backlog of uncompleted projects stalled by Carter. In some cases, the administration has held critical water projects, such as the Central Arizona Project, hostage to state passage of restrictive water use laws. In December 1979 the Carter administration presented a new set of regulations governing water project evaluation. Premised on competition for scarce, fixed water supplies, the regulations make it impossible to define a given water project as in the *national* interest and therefore worthy of federal support. Further, as in its energy policy, the Carter administration has taken every opportunity to enforce water "conservation" by raising users' fees.

- Shortly after attacking the water projects, Carter and his Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus launched a demagogic campaign to dismantle Imperial Valley agriculture on the grounds that the strict letter of the 1902 reclamation law, which limited farm holdings using federally developed water to 160 acres (a large farm at that time), was being violated in California, where producers farm 1,000 and more acres of irrigated land at once. Now the administration threatens to veto the compromise reclamation reform legislation pending in Congress which increases the farm size limit to between 900 and 1,000 acres, with additional leasing allowances. This week, the National Farmers Union (NFU) gave a big boost to the administration's effort. "Why subsidize a further shift of production to the Far West?" the NFU asked, claiming that Western water development gave an unfair advantage to agriculture there.

- Interior Secretary Andrus has been carrying out a campaign to prevent the use of public lands for grazing in the West. A series of executive orders and de facto regulatory decrees has been resisted by Western governors and producers, who have forced the Interior Department and Bureau of Land Management to hold hearings on the subject. On a parallel track, the Agriculture Department, pursuant to the so-called Resource Conservation Act of 1977, is now exploring means of coercing producers to use prescribed soil conservation techniques on penalty of losing eligibility for federal farm programs. It is by aggressively holding farm prices below cost of production, much less parity, that the Carter administration and its predecessors have systematically denied farm producers the capital to make the necessary investments in land conservation and improvement.