

## Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

### R&D cuts traded for Carter votes?

*Uncovering a kibosh on federal mechanization efforts, in order to court Chavez.*

**"I**'m not saying there isn't any such thing," Deputy Director for Joint Planning and Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Science and Education Administration (SEA) James Nielson stammered in a recent telephone interview, "but I have to get a better hold on what you are talking about." Dr. Nielson was responding to my inquiry concerning reliable reports that top levels of the USDA and SEA are now moving administratively to terminate federal work and funding on mechanization in three major areas: apples, citrus fruit and lettuce.

Federal support for agricultural mechanization research was pushed into the limelight last December when Secretary Bergland told an audience in California—the home of militant stoop labor advocate Cesar Chavez—that he thought federal support for labor-saving devices "improper."

A so-called "Redirection Plan" ordering that work be stopped and funds withdrawn from ongoing projects to develop mechanical harvesting technology in the three named areas is reportedly now being circulated for approval in the command structure of the SEA. The plan will not pull federal dollars out of the state research units altogether, knowledgeable sources say, but will order their "redirection" to approved projects. The same sources surmise that the plan is being cleared now for implemen-

tation as of the beginning of the new fiscal year Oct. 1, and report that project leaders affected are being so advised.

The decision to single out the apple, citrus and lettuce sectors—to the exclusion of the myriad other fruits and vegetables like broccoli, peppers, sugar cane, etc., where mechanization work will be able to continue—smells like a crude vote-getting ploy. The three targeted sectors are among the largest in terms of numbers of farmworkers who stand to be "displaced" from their stoop labor by mechanization.

As we reported here several months ago, at the time that Secretary Bergland originally made known his preference for cheap, manual labor over machines, a lawsuit against the University of California had been making its way through the state courts. The plaintiffs sought to prevent tax dollars from being used to support research that allegedly benefits private, not public interests. The suit, brought by the California Rural Legal Assistance project, centers on the development of a mechanical tomato picker at U.C.-Davis, where a prototype lettuce picker has also been developed. The CRLA maintains not only that the mechanical harvesting machinery is increasing tomato production, but is eliminating thousands of menial jobs. This, according to CRLA, is contrary to the public interest.

"We will not put federal money

into research where—other factors being equal or neutral—the major effect of that research will be the replacing of an adequate and willing workforce with machines," the Secretary stated.

If successful, this move will not simply reverse the tradition of high-technology agriculture, but undermine the "American System" of progress based on of an ever-more-highly skilled workforce.

The directors of the fifty state agricultural experiment stations quickly pledged to challenge the Secretary if forced. It is in this context that the administrative initiative was quietly launched, preempting the activities of the special task force on mechanization. SEA's Nielson, also a co-chairman of the task force, was happy in fact to issue denials on behalf of the task force. They had decided against a study of existing mechanization projects for lack of time and money, he insisted.

But when confronted with details of the administrative maneuvers, Dr. Nielson became curiously ill-informed for a man who is one of six deputy directors at the head of the SEA. "There is constant review and redirection every year," he said. "It is motivated by the tightness of budgets, or sometimes by congressional priorities," he continued. "Perhaps they are sensitive to the need to look especially closely at these areas because of the Secretary's concerns."

When it was suggested that there might be someone else in the SEA administration with more direct knowledge of the situation, Dr. Nielson demurred. "Let me look into it," he insisted. "I will look into it and I will call you back if there is anything to talk about."