

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

Behind the food crisis scare

It comes from Malthusians like Hunger Project members, not from productivity boosters.

A recent rash of headlines predicts food shortages for 1981. "World worry," headlines the *Wall Street Journal*. "Food shortages feared in 1981. . . globe's appetite is growing faster than its output." "Global grain shortage feared," blares the *Los Angeles Times*. Farm prices will zoom, food prices will explode, say experts ranging from Washington agriculture consultant John Schnittker to the Brookings Institution's Fred Sanderson; we will witness a bitter confrontation between producers and consumers as the world's population scrambles for grain.

The common point of reference for all the scenario-mongers is the 1972-74 crisis, when the price of wheat tripled, Americans boycotted high-priced meat, and the Sahel drought and a shortage of supplies caused famine in Africa. Are we headed for a replay?

To consumers watching steady food price rises and reading the daily papers, it seems plausible. After all, nearly 20 percent of American corn and soybean crops were destroyed by heat and drought this year.

A review of the relevant facts shows that a food-crisis hoax is being deliberately concocted, in order to launch a new, kookier and more destructive round of the Club of Rome's World Food Conference operations. This one is an international campaign based in San Francisco, called The Hunger Project.

The project was launched in 1977 by Werner Erhard, the founder of the est cult, and presently claims more than a million and a half members in 22 countries. Dr. Peter Bourne, who left his official Carter administration position after two drug scandals, is a member of the project's board. The group is dedicated to "encouraging individuals to think about hunger and to cultivate their feelings about hunger."

The cries of alarm have no statistical basis. Take wheat and rice, the basic food grains. The United States this year produced an absolute record crop—at about 64 million tons—that will readily accommodate increased domestic use and increased exports to leave year-end stocks slightly higher than last year at 25 million tons.

Wheat production outside the United States, at about 375 million tons, is higher than last year. Western Europe has a bumper crop, and, together with the U.S., will compensate for expected crop shortfalls due to drought in Australia and Canada. Year-end stocks worldwide, amounting to about a two-month supply, will be slightly lower than last year.

The picture for rice is even brighter, with record world production leaving a 24-million-ton stockpile at year-end, slightly greater than current carryover stocks despite increased consumption.

Coarse grain—feed grains like sorghum and corn—was hurt this year, especially in the United States. The U.S. production shortfall of about 40 million tons, coupled with a projected increase in consumption worldwide, will lower year-end stocks by almost 30 percent to about a one-month supply, despite increased production outside the U.S.

What we are dealing with is a relative decrease in carryover stocks, those stocks left at the point the 1981 harvest begins, and not a decrease in supplies relative to demand during this production year. In order to be in the kind of trouble the crisis-mongers are predicting, we would not only have to have another crop shortfall in the U.S. equal to this year's, but another Soviet and Chinese crop shortfall as well, combined with another year of even worse drought problems in Canada, Australia, and Argentina. Even then, we would still have a chance to make one more harvest before being forced to cut back livestock feeding, and therefore meat consumption. Only then would food grain supplies be threatened directly.

I draw this out, not to defend the status quo in regard to food production capacity, but to emphasize that our scenerists have concocted a phony argument. In fact, there is an immediate danger to global food supplies: a U.S. farm policy and Federal Reserve credit squeeze that is driving the most productive farmers in the world into bankruptcy, while preventing underdeveloped countries from building a viable farm sector. But that sort of consideration does not fit into the new hunger-crisis scenario.