
Pesticides scare: another attack on agriculture

The USDA has discovered that Americans cannot have both food and clean water, since productive agriculture "pollutes" groundwater. Marcia Merry dissects this mysterious wisdom.

Beginning in early 1988, the U.S. Department of Agriculture went on a rampage against American farming methods, in coordination with the Environmental Protection Agency, making use of the issue of clean groundwater as a weapon against farming and food output. The scenario features the assertion that there are traces of pesticides in groundwater—including even the “trickle down” from honest manure—and calls for an end to the farming practices which are allegedly responsible, especially modern row-cropping and animal husbandry.

The effort involves key sections of the USDA, such as the Extension Service, but also state government agencies and private zero-growth groups. The goal is, first, “guidelines,” but soon, penalties, against modern farming practices.

The stated issue of concern is drinking water, but the objective is that guiding the general policy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture: the elimination of America’s technology-intensive independent family farm. This reflects the objectives of the financial circles in and around the International Monetary Fund, who run the USDA through the world food cartel firms.

Half of the United States’ 240 million people rely on private or community well-water. For the last 20 years, there has been a slowdown, nearly a halt, to the maintenance and expansion of water treatment facilities, and the construction of new water development systems—dams, canals, and irrigation and water transport systems. This disinvestment policy is the real threat to the water supply. But the USDA’s method is to say, “The farmer did it with his fertilizer.”

The foremost instigator of the “groundwater” issue has been the Washington-based Conservation Foundation, which started a campaign in the early 1980s around the issue of soil

erosion and “runoff.” In 1980 came the Conservation Foundation’s book, *The Future of American Agriculture as a Strategic Resource*. Among the sub-chapters was, “The Impact of Fertilizers.” In 1984 came another Conservation Foundation book, on the theme of “non-point source” pollution, namely, how farming pollutes the environment with its chemicals and manures. Similar books and reports were published in Western Europe at the time.

The new five-year farm law passed in 1985, the National Food Security Act, embodies many of these bogus Conservation Foundation environmental concerns. The chief one was the matter of “conserving farmland,” by making it non-farmland, taking it out of food production altogether. This, in the name of preventing soil erosion and runoff. Created was a “Conservation Reserve Program.” Some 45 million crop acres, well over 10% of the U.S. crop acreage base, are to be locked up for at least 10 years. Second, there is the “swampbuster” clause, which penalizes farmers for draining swamps, since these are supposed to be the “natural” means of filtering water, and also provide a wildlife habitat.

The 1985 farm law was just the beginning. Since then, there has been a drumbeat of reports and new Executive branch initiatives that threaten the very foundation of the food supply of the West—all in the name of pure water.

The scare operation

A short chronology of the scare operation shows the focus and coordination involved.

In 1984, the USDA Extension Service and the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) appointed a national task force to assess the groundwater quality. That task force published its report in February 1986.

The identification of “Water Quality” was eventually cit-

ed as a national priority initiative for the entire Cooperative Extension System. Four strategic issues were defined, and are now being pursued in the media, state and local governments, schools, churches, and elsewhere, with the energy of a zealot's cause.

As stated in the fall 1988 "Extension Review," the "critical issues" are: "Issue 1. Public understanding of water resources, especially the nature of the resource . . . why it is vulnerable . . . and the options for making it safe." Excluded here is any option involving large-scale water development projects—of the nature of the Tennessee Valley Authority or other past successes.

"Issue 2. The impacts of agricultural, industrial, and household chemicals on water quality and subsequent uses and users of water." The assumption here is that man's activities contaminate water.

"Issue 3. The importance of water conservation programs and strategies for domestic, agricultural, and municipal water consumers to meet local problems such as drought-induced shortages, declining water tables, increased pumping costs, and increased production and treatment costs." The watchword here is, "Use less." Nowhere are water development projects considered.

"Issue 4. The key role of local government officials in developing strategies for addressing the public concern about the interactions of land use, chemical use, and water quality." This is eco-lingo for pressuring state officials to attack farmers and industries for supposedly harming water supplies.

In January 1988, a national workshop on "water quality" was held for extension directors and administrators. This was followed up by another conference in Washington, D.C. in February, attended by 165 people from 44 states.

By the time of the opening of the winter sessions of legislatures in the farmbelt states, schemes were in place in many of them to advance the process of curtailing farming on the claim that it is a threat to water. In Maryland, for example, there is the issue of curbing farming in order to protect swamps and other designated "wetlands" found in the watersheds feeding the Chesapeake Bay. Other states have variations on this theme.

In December, the Environmental Protection Agency fired its own special volley on the issue of groundwater. The map shown here is from a report by the EPA issued on Dec. 13, 1988, called "Pesticides in Ground Water." The report is a pastiche of groundwater readings from various parts of the country, which even EPA officials do not claim has any scientific validity. Victor Kimm, EPA's then acting assistant administrator for pesticides and toxic substances, said in a press release, "The information in the agency's interim report reinforces EPA's concern about the potential for pesticides to contaminate groundwater. This data base will be helpful in supporting significant and critical ongoing EPA regulatory activities to mitigate the potential risks from pesticides in groundwater." But in the same release, Kimm observed, "However, there are dangers in trying to use the data in the

report released today as they currently stand to indicate the statistical significance of the problem on a national level. Many agricultural areas have not been sampled and are not statistically represented."

The main function of the EPA interim report was to give copy to the media to further a generalized scare over "poisons in your drinking water," at the time that state level officials were moving to nail farming as the culprit. The EPA announced that it is now conducting a nationwide survey of well water, which, when completed in late 1989, will, according to Kimm, "provide more representative data on the extent of pesticides in groundwater."

With William Reilly as the new head of EPA—he was formerly the chairman of the Conservation Foundation—one may be sure that no scientific facts will be permitted to stand in the way of the financial oligarchy's vendetta against modern agriculture.

In January 1989, the USDA Economic Research Service came out with its own salvo against agriculture, in a new report called, "Managing Farm Nutrients; Trade-offs for Surface- and Ground-Water Quality." This report features a new "field-scale computer simulation model, CREAMS (Chemicals, Runoff, and Erosion from Agricultural Management Systems), to "prove" there is a "pollutant runoff" from agricultural cropland into water. The report says that the recent successes in mitigating soil losses through ground surface measures such as no-till plowing may have been hollow victories, because such measures do not mitigate the leaching down into deeper groundwater of nitrates and other chemicals. The report then comes to the point, "Groundwater quality problems cannot be alleviated by implementing soil conservation practices alone, but must include changes in farm chemical use."

This report focused on the Conestoga River headwaters in Eastern Pennsylvania, where there is both farming and relatively high-density residential population and water demand. The report made no mention of two facts: first, that area residents could receive plentiful, wholesome water by the construction of improved water development systems in Eastern Pennsylvania in the area between the Susquehanna and Delaware Water Basins; and second, that there is no established threat from the current levels of nitrates and other substances in the water. The report simply insists that farmers must cut back sharply on both manure and chemical nitrogen applications. The report states, without foundation, "Widespread application of such levels of manure and *N* are likely to pollute drinking water wells in such groundwater-sensitive areas as the Conestoga Headwaters."

The report fatuously discusses all manner of when and how farmers should store and apply manure to facilitate the uptake of nutrients by pastures and crops, but then threatens, "Agricultural non-point pollution control must be achieved more efficiently, or proponents of voluntary conservation programs will be in a relatively weak position to argue against regulation and other mandatory measures."