

Yeutter refuses to aid wheat growers

by Marcia Merry

On April 25, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a special "relief" package that denied help to the drought-stricken winter wheat growers in Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and all other winter wheat regions. After making a visit April 14 to Kansas to see the damage, Yeutter commented, "Rain is what these states need. But I can't guarantee that," and refused to authorize the extension of the 1988 Drought Relief Act to cover winter wheat growers (whose crop was planted last fall). The USDA package offers relief measures for feeding livestock—very hard hit by drought—but nothing for grain growers.

Technically, the extension of the 1988 act requires congressional action, but the USDA is opposed to the idea, and is turning a deaf ear to fears about the grain harvest, the food supply, and the crisis on farms.

Demands for action on the drought question, and on the financial crisis of farmers, are forthcoming from every region of the Great Plains farm belt. The Kansas congressional delegation has initiated legislation to extend the 1988 Drought Relief Act to winter wheat farmers.

On Palm Sunday, Kansas Gov. Mike Hayden led a "state prayer day" in hopes of relief. On April 26, Hayden reported on national ABC-TV that 50% of the state wheat crop is already lost for certain. He estimated that half of the 12.6 million acres planted last fall are not worth harvesting.

Kansas produces almost one-fifth the total U.S. wheat crop, and accounts for over one-third of the nation's preferred bread wheat. Because of the huge grain sales to the Soviet Union, and the drawdown of reserves, U.S. wheat stocks are headed for 20-year lows. The 1989 Argentine wheat harvest was low, and the wheat stocks are low in Canada—the second largest wheat exporter after the United States.

On April 26, the House Agriculture Committee chairman Kika de la Garza (D-Tex.) held an "open" hearing (open to all congressmen) on the impact of the drought. He commented that last summer's drought was much more publicized than this year's, so there is less momentum now to grant assistance, though the drought continues. He might have added that the 1988 drought hit during an election year.

USDA chief meteorologist Norton Strommen has been attempting to play down the drought. On April 24, he told a group of farm journalists that he was optimistic about a break in the weather. "Clearly it's far too early to call for alarm at

this point." So far, USDA relief provisions include permission for livestock and poultry producers in the drought-hit Midwest and in southern California, to graze their animals on, or to cut for feed, fields that are being idled under the various federal land set-aside programs. Farmers will be deemed eligible to do this if the USDA local Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service offices judge that 40% of the forage and pastures in their counties is ruined by drought.

Already, states such as Iowa have had emergency measures to help farmers dig wells and haul water to parched livestock. In Iowa, 95% of the cropland is deficient in subsoil moisture. Gov. Terry Branstad has declared at least six counties drought disaster regions.

Financial crisis, too

In Iowa in April, the legislature almost unanimously approved an extension of a moratorium on farm foreclosures, that was originally proclaimed as a governor's executive action in 1985 by Branstad. The measure allows a judge to grant a one-year stay on payments on principal (not the interest) on farm debt, and to stay any farm foreclosure action during that period. The original motivation for the governor's order from October 1985, states in part: "Whereas agriculture affects 65% of all jobs in the State of Iowa, and Iowans in small towns to large cities are threatened by the farm crisis. . . . I hereby declare that a state of economic emergency now exists. The purpose behind this declaration is to stabilize the economy of this state by permitting the implementation of the moratorium continuance provision . . . [giving] mortgagers additional time to stabilize their indebtedness."

The value of this stay has been more symbolic than actual in the face of the drive—condoned and conducted by the USDA—to dispossess farmers by the Farm Credit System agencies and the Farmers Home Administration, insurance companies, and other lenders. (See *Agriculture*, p. 14.)

In North Dakota on April 26, Sen. Kent Conrad (D) held a day-long public hearing on "The Implementation of the Agriculture Credit Act of 1987." This is the law that gives a veneer of "protocol" to how the FmHA and Farm Credit System can drive farmers off the land. There were 15 examples given of farm families subjected to all manner of mistreatment by the lending officials. Senator Conrad was prompted at many points to attempt to defend Congress by saying, "We didn't want this to happen." The state director of the FmHA Ralph Leet evaded all questions from farmers by saying he couldn't "get specific," and gave the press the official USDA-FmHA line: "We're just trying to restructure, and keep the farmers on the land."

North Dakota dairy farmer Annabelle Bourgois, a spokesman for the international Food for Peace organization, concluded the day's testimony with an appeal for a debt moratorium. "This is insane to have all these farm liquidations and foreclosures, when all these people are going hungry throughout the world."