

## Agriculture by Marcia Merry

### Food shortages: a national security risk

*Don't wait for empty shelves to appear in the grocery stores before you believe there are food shortages.*

Many people hold the mistaken belief that the "proof" of an economic depression comes on the day that you go to the bank, and the doors are locked, or on the day that the "Big Crash" on the market takes place.

There is a similar belief that the proof of food shortages comes on the day that you go to the grocery store, and the shelves are empty.

Both views are naive, and go far to explaining the current passivity of Americans generally, as the national economy disintegrates, and food scarcities worsen month by month.

In the case of food, the sheer volume of domestically produced commodities entering the national food supply pipeline has diminished.

Where it now shows up most dramatically is in the reduced food stocks for the national network of food banks and soup kitchens: There is less emergency food for the needy, the very young, and the very old.

In fall 1989, the U.S. Department of Agriculture ceased supplying milk powder and cheese—key sources of animal protein—to school lunch programs, and to supplemental food services for the poor. Beef and other USDA commodities are also in short supply, or have been cut off, because of the 1988 drought and the ongoing Department of Agriculture policies to suppress farm production.

In the 1986-87 school year, school cafeterias' nutrition programs received \$442 million worth of "bonus" commodities from the USDA (stocks that the government owned and could disburse). But in the current school year, that assistance has shrunk to about \$125 million, most of which is

for butter, which many school programs already have.

"Schools around the country are having to cope with these massive shortfalls," according to Kevin Dando, spokesman for the American School Food Service Association. "This is the school year when it's been a major trauma. The term I keep hearing about is 'the silent erosion' of the school lunch program."

The crisis in school lunch programs this year in California, the nation's top agriculture state, is indicative of most of the nation. In San Diego, 17% of the students who bought lunch at school have now stopped. Last summer, when the city's board of education faced the loss of \$600,000 in USDA commodities this year, the officials raised the lunch prices by 20¢, and as a result, 305,000 lunches will be sold this year.

In Los Angeles, the Unified School District lost more than \$7 million in federal food subsidies this year, and then raised its lunch prices for elementary school children from 50¢ to 75¢, and for secondary level students from \$1.25 to \$1.50. As a result, there will be a drop of about 13% in the number of lunches provided this year, which amounts to 1.4 million fewer meals supplied to the children.

School lunches provide one-third of the daily nutritional requirements for millions of children. Without access to these inexpensive meals, many will absolutely suffer malnutrition. Jane Bohrer, the San Diego food services director, stresses that moderate- and low-income families are terribly "price sensitive," and are quick to re-

act when school lunch prices are raised. For millions of children, a more expensive meal price means they will now skip lunch altogether.

The original National School Lunch Act was passed by Congress in 1946, when analysis of the war effort showed that one-third of all draftees rejected for service in World War II were found to be physically unfit because of nutritional deficiencies. The stated motivation for the new program was "as a measure of national security."

In addition to the lack of federal commodities for schools, local districts will be hard hit by federal budget cuts proposed Jan. 29 by President Bush. The administration proposes to cut \$180 million in 1991 by making it more difficult for families to qualify for free school lunches for their children, in case of emergency and poverty.

In the face of the squeeze on food supplies, what is the USDA policy? More cuts in output and capacity to produce. In January, Agriculture Secretary Clayton Yeutter cut the support price of milk for the farmer by another 50¢ per hundred pounds of raw milk, in order to prevent the possibility of "surpluses."

In terms of grain, the situation is the same, although not so obvious. Wheat is so scarce nationally that Yeutter has even authorized dipping into the National Wheat Reserve, which, since 1982, was supposed to have been held for emergencies. U.S. wheat stocks are their lowest since the early 1970s. Yet no special measures are in effect to compensate for a continued poor outlook for wheat harvests and stock replenishing.

Oats—despite all the media hype about the alleged benefits of oat bran—are a net import crop for the United States. The nation is no longer self-sufficient.