

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

Boxing Haig in on the embargo

The secretary of state can no longer claim to be 'in control' in this aspect of foreign policy.

Given a mighty assist in recent weeks from Europe, domestic opponents of Secretary of State Alexander Haig's continued embargo on grain sales to the Soviet Union are preparing what may be the final blow for the discredited policy. The "Agri-vine" in Washington is rife with happy rumors, but reliable sources caution that while administration and congressional forces are "poised to make the right decision," State Department signals are still unclear. Many are looking toward Haig's return from the Middle East.

Following Senate passage of a nonbinding resolution sponsored by Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kan.) demanding an end to the embargo, with prominent Senate Republicans jumping aboard, Sen. Edward Zorinsky (D-Neb.) last week reintroduced his bill ordering the administration to "show cause" or terminate the trade ban within 30 days. Producer groups view the Zorinsky bill as the most meaningful of the anti-embargo bills forwarded over the past year, one that is "practical" and "plausible."

During the last week of March, many people judged that the embargo didn't have more than a week. These projections flowed almost directly from the public blows Secretary of State Haig had received in the crisis management flap. Even when tension heightened in Poland over the April 4 weekend, neither the rumors nor the political pressure on the embargo subsided.

On April 3 Secretary of Agriculture John Block blasted Haig for failing to report or discuss with him the content of a meeting Haig had with French embassy officials, who had informed the secretary of state that a 600,000 ton wheat sale to the Soviet Union was under consideration. "I am furious about not being informed and kept up to date on it," Block told the press.

At the April 1 Senate Agriculture Committee hearings where Secretary Block presented the long-awaited administration farm bill, discussion centered on control of farm policy. Senator after senator asked the question: "Does the USDA control farm policy, or is it OMB and State?" Block was careful to emphasize that the White House wants to lift the embargo, and that the situation is extremely fluid from day to day.

Concern over farm exports is uppermost in many of the senators' minds, and they expressed dismay not only on the embargo, but also over the fact that the programs for export market development were getting the short end of the stick in the USDA legislation.

On April 8, Senator Rudolph Boschwitz (R-Minn.) set hearings in his Foreign Agricultural Policy subcommittee on the farm export situation. Boschwitz wants an "overview" in terms of trade prospects and policy problems, according to an aide. The hearings will certainly provide that, as well as momentum for a decision on the embargo. Wit-

nesses include leaders in the Agriculture Council of America's (ACA) Farm Export Education Project, such as AGRI Industries President Jerry O'Dowd, Texas A&M economist Michael Cook, who wrote the comprehensive ACA report on farm export expansion, and National Association of Wheatgrowers President Jim Billington.

Meanwhile, there is considerable evidence that the Agriculture Department itself is acting to keep up the many-sided pressure for its rapid resolution. Deputy Secretary Richard Lyng told a visiting group of Minnesota grain exchange managers on March 16 that the grain embargo was hurting U.S. agriculture more than the Soviets and ought to be ended.

"I don't think the real disaster of the embargo has yet been felt," Assistant Secretary for Economics Bill Leshner is reported to have said recently. Leshner said that lifting the embargo would help "build a market" for farm exports, and that retaining it much longer threatens to severely curtail export prospects.

The Soviets too have stepped up their activity on the embargo in the United States. At an unprecedented March 22 dinner conference, hosted for members of the American Agricultural Editors Association by the Soviet trade mission, Soviet representatives reviewed the facts proving the embargo was a failure, and diplomatically but firmly proposed that the U.S. stop holding world trade hostage to politics. The existing bilateral trade pact with the Soviet Union, which kept a not inconsequential 8 million tons of grain exports per year flowing East despite the embargo, expires on Sept. 30.