

Agriculture by Marion Peretti

'Set aside' fiasco pushed in Europe

The Brussels bureaucrats have another scheme to cut their budget—and make farming more backward.

High on the agenda of the mid-February summit of the European Community in Brussels is an item designed to further wreck European agriculture: implementation of the notorious "set aside" policy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture—known in Europe by its American name—for idling cropland to cut production.

The "set aside" program comes on the heels of the quota system to strangle milk, meat, and wine production, under the pretext of overproduction.

The EC bureaucrats plan to transfer funds now used to support the prices of farm products, into the "set aside" programs. A subsidy between \$480-720 will be paid per year for each idled hectare, depending on the fertility of the fields, with 50-60% of the costs coming from member governments. The aim is to obtain a savings of about 40%, since between price supports, withdrawing surplus from the markets, and warehousing it, the EC now pays about \$1,000 for the production of a single hectare, which is about 50 quintals, or 5,000 kilos, of grain.

The "set aside" model is an austerity model that goes back to the extensive farming mode that prevailed before Justus Liebig, the 19th-century German chemist, pioneered modern intensive agriculture, and made it possible to triple harvests by introducing chemical and mineral fertilizers. At that time, half as much food as today was produced on three times the land, with a labor force that was most of the population.

The return to pre-capitalist times and a servile peasantry seems to suit the malthusian EC bureaucrats. More-

over, this farm policy is designed to use the pretext of "too much surplus" to reduce prices to farmers and bankrupt them, with the result of reducing of food production—and world population.

There has been talk on the eve of the EC summit, of fixing ceilings for both grain production and the crops grown in tandem with grain—sunflower, soybeans, and other oilseeds—and to penalize overproduction of them.

In reality, the debate on "European Community surplus" is a fraud. Even the EC's own published data show this. In the EC warehouses are 12 million tons of grain. With an annual consumption of 155 million tons, these stocks would only supply European consumption for 28 days.

Scientifically speaking, a hectare of land absorbs an average of 3 trillion calories of solar energy, or about 380 kW per hectare. With modern intensive agriculture, 1% or more of this energy is transformed by photosynthesis into plant cells, or biomass. The efficiency of this process on uncultivated land is only 0.1-0.2%. In the photosynthesis process, oxygen is produced and released into the air, while the plants take the carbon dioxide from the air, produced by respiration and by combustion in industry, etc.

It can be said that the EC Council of Ministers wants to cut oxygen production by about 20%, given that they wish to reduce farm production by 20%. Adding the wave of financial bankruptcies in the farm sector (31,000 farms have shut down since 1982),

desertification lies ahead. It is an already acute problem in southern Italy, due to lack of cultivation, reforestation, and water.

In Sicily alone this year, 850,000 tons of citrus fruits will be destroyed; exports have dropped by 30%. This happens, even though for 20 years the technology has existed to irradiate food with cobalt-60, which would allow the fruit to be sterilized and shipped all over the world.

In Germany, some desperate farmers have started a pilot experiment. The project provides that land which has been "set aside" for not growing wheat or rye will be planted with vegetables such as beets or potatoes, to keep the soil from becoming impoverished. But they have to commit themselves to not sell these crops or even feed them to livestock!

The crazy solutions presented by the EC are being forcefully backed by Ernst Albrecht, the Christian Democratic minister-president of the West German state of Lower Saxony, where the "set aside" model has been applied. Albrecht, mooted to succeed Jacques Delors in the presidency of the EC Commission, is notorious as one of the first German politicians to open the way to Greenie anti-nuclear violence, by his non-interventionist policy.

Italian politicians are not far behind Albrecht. The president of Italy's family farmers' organization Coldiretti, Arcangelo Lobianco, is putting up some fight. Speaking to a convention in Naples on Feb. 2 on agriculture's prospects for 1988, he warned, "The 'set aside' policy is certainly not equally applicable through the Community's area. In Italy, for example, it cannot be applied in absolute terms, except through depopulation and resultant impoverishment of some zones, and environmental damage."