

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

A chain reaction of crises

The Department of Agriculture says not to worry, but drought-stricken farmers are demanding emergency measures.

Despite the occasional July rains over the drought belt, there has been extensive damage to crops—especially to corn and spring wheat, and to pastures and livestock. Don't believe the low damage estimates put out by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in July, for example, a projected 25% reduction in the corn harvest. The true corn harvest reduction may be 50% or more, as it was in the drought of 1983. You can see this for yourself in the photographs of stressed corn plants on television.

However, what most non-farmers may not be aware of is the chain-reaction impact from the drought now taking place throughout the agriculture sector, in terms of all other daily diet essentials—meat, milk, vegetables, and so forth. People may expect higher prices, but what if the food will not be there at any price?

Congress is paying no heed to the disintegration process under way in the food chain. Only on the state and local level have some farmers taken the lead to issue recommendations on emergency measures to preserve the inventory and potential to produce. If these local initiatives become a national movement, then there is a chance to reverse the otherwise inevitable catastrophe. But time is running out.

Consider the most obvious situation, the current crisis of the corn acreage: Right now, there are millions of acres of standing corn stalks across the cornbelt states—from Ohio west through Nebraska—that will produce

no ears, or, perhaps, a few ears, and a few kernels per field. Because of the timing and severity of the drought this year, the pollination phase of the corn plant has been a failure for much of the crop. Corn devastated like this is not worth "growing out," and harvesting for grain.

When a national yield figure of corn is quoted, for example, a prediction that yields will be 50% of normal, this means that some fields will produce at a reduced level, and some will not produce at all.

In areas such as Wisconsin, and other parts of the "dairy belt," where corn output is part of regionally integrated farm practices involving pastures, row-cropping, forage, and milk animal husbandry, the corn plants can be chopped and stored for silage, and some fed to the cows fresh as "green chop," to which would then allow the burnt summer pastures time to regenerate. This makes use of the damaged corn plants, and lessens the impact of the drought somewhat, but does not solve the problem of financial hardship to the farmer, because high-producing dairy herds need corn and high-quality feed in their diets. The price of this feed is soaring.

However, in Iowa, the top corn state in the nation (producing 23% of the U.S. corn crop), there are no large cattle herds for the corn stalks to "feed through." In recent years, there has been a precipitous decline in beef herds in Iowa, which once was in the top three cattle-producing states in the na-

tion, along with Texas and Oklahoma. (Hogs, the other top Iowa meat animal, do not digest cellulose in corn stalks, while cattle do.)

Therefore, thousands of Iowa farmers are facing the prospect of having to mow down, disc in, and plough up the corn fields—an almost total waste. They do this to prevent "volunteer" corn from springing up next year, from any kernels that may form and drop from this year's disaster. (Corn is planted annually from hybrid, not carryover, seed.)

Instead of this waste, some Iowa farmers have appealed for emergency coordination through the state agriculture extension offices, or otherwise, to both use the corn for silage, and to preserve and expand the shrinking beef brood herd. Iowa corn farmers could "billet" a certain number of beef animals per county. Young heifers, otherwise now going to slaughter because of the burnt pastures, the high cost of feed, and the lack of water, could instead be retained and grown to become breeding animals.

There are thousands of empty silos, empty livestock pens, and silage conveyer belts in Iowa that could handle the livestock and their corn silage. Nutrients are still intact in the corn plants, and could provide rations to sustain the beef animals.

In addition, emergency measures and financial assistance are required to maintain and expand the national dairy herd. The herd is now down to a record low of 8.8 million head, down from 11 million before the federal "Dairy Herd Termination Program" and the current drought cycle.

In regions such as the Southwest, animal feed is not grown, but bought in bulk for local herds. Prices for feed (soybean oil meal, corn) have already risen 70% this year. These animals will be going to slaughter, unless relief is organized.