

## Agriculture by Marcia Merry

### Feeding 15 million hungry children

*A farm mobilization will be required, quite the contrary of USDA policies to reduce "food surpluses."*

**A**t the end of October a report was released in Washington, D.C. by the Urban Institute, releasing statistics that show the United States has a higher proportion of children living in poverty than seven other industrialized democracies. The report states, "The poverty of American children contrasts glaringly with the poverty of the young in every other country but Australia."

These children are deprived of every necessity, but in particular, they have inadequate diets at a time when the policy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture seeks to prevent the buildup of food "surpluses."

At least 15 million children are reported to be hungry in the United States from past census surveys, but the current number is probably over 20 million children, both because of the general impoverishment rate of families under the layoffs and dislocations of the "Great Recovery," and because of the decline in food supplies available through the charity channels.

In the city of St. Louis, for example, which is typical of hundreds of large urban areas, the number of families asking for food assistance increased from 14,000 in January this year, up to 19,000 in June.

The international child poverty study used comparative data for 1979, and found that about 17.1% of U.S. children live in families with income below the poverty line, and who have access to fewer compensating benefits for their health and welfare. According to the criteria—which were based on U.S. definitions and dollar cut-offs for measuring poverty—the other nations ranked as having the following

percentages of their children living in poverty families: 5.1% in Switzerland, 8.2% in West Germany, 10.7% in Great Britain, and 16.9% in Australia.

The study was carefully devised to use the "market basket" approach in each nation, to prevent currency exchange rates from distorting the situation. This same yardstick is used as a measure of "purchasing power parity" by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Child welfare experts concur that the picture is no better today, and very likely it is worse. Last year the Census Bureau calculated that 20% of U.S. children were in households below the poverty line, much higher than in 1979. Making matters worse, these children have access to fewer medical benefits than those in the other nations surveyed.

A calculation of the amounts of food required to provide 15 million children just one square meal a day over and above their current inadequate daily diets shows dramatically how immoral the current Washington policy to "downscale" U.S. farming is. If all U.S. households had the purchasing power to afford the kinds of foods they needed and wanted, there would be empty shelves in the grocery stores right now. Look at the calculations for the farm inputs of livestock and crop acres needed to meet just this "one square meal a day" approach.

To provide each of the 15 million children a tall glass of milk a day for a year requires about 1.248 million tons of milk output, or about 152,500 good, producing dairy cows.

To provide each of the 15 million

children a daily serving of vegetables requires about 463,630 tons of vegetables, from at least 565,600 acres of truck gardening.

To give each child a daily 3-ounce portion of beef for a year requires 464,000 tons of table weight beef, which would require at least 1,632,500 slaughter animals, not counting the breeding stock to be maintained, and so forth.

For just a slice of bread per child a day for 15 million children a year, requires 47,727 tons of wheat a year, which requires 47,730 crop acres. Similarly, for the oatmeal cookie dessert, another 35,000 crop acres are required.

Overall, assembling the food to give the 15 million hungry children merely one decent meal a day for the year defines a farm expansion of factors of production including: 152,500 dairy cows; 1,632,500 beef cows; 82,730 acres of small grains; and 565,600 acres of vegetables.

At present, all of the factors are short—even relative to the current deficient levels of consumption nationally. For example, due to the federal "Dairy Herd Termination Program" and to the drought and the farm crisis, there is a milk shortage now in the nation. Fresh milk is being shipped long distances to meet the demand for fluid milk, but cheese factories are unable to get enough milk, and many are shutting down, never to reopen. In early October, James Barr, the director of the National Milk Producers Federation, called for a "national debate" on the inadequacy of the USDA-mandated levels of national dairy product reserves because of the current crisis.

Oats are now so short in the U.S., that they are being imported. Yet the USDA has mandated a 5% oats land acreage set-aside for 1989, to "prevent possible oversupply."