

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

A farm bill to wipe out agriculture

The new five-year U.S. farm bill should really be called the "Food Scarcity Act of 1990."

On June 14, at 2:05 in the morning, a voice vote of the House Agriculture Committee of the U.S. Congress approved a proposed farm bill package for the next five years. To replace the expiring 1985 "Food Security Act," the new bill, H.R. 3950, is called the "Food and Agricultural Resources Act of 1990." However, it should, more accurately, be titled the "Food Scarcity Act of 1990."

The new package continues some of the disastrous policies from the last bill, and adds even worse innovations. This is a result of the deliberate policy of the food cartel corporations to shut down family farming and feudalize what remains of American agriculture.

Look at the farm legislation in terms of the three major elements of food and farm policy: food supply, condition of farmers, and state of the resource base:

- *Depleted food stocks.* Corn stocks are at their lowest level in 10 years. Wheat stocks are at the early-1970s levels. Dairy supplies are below the level which would be utilized if households had the income to purchase the quality diet they want. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has had to stop supplying the National School Lunch Program (set up after World War II to prevent malnutrition) with nonfat milk powder and cheese. The USDA has stopped or curtailed supplying these items to the supplemental food programs for nursing mothers, infants (set up in 1974 to curb infant mortality), and the elderly. Epidemics of measles, tuberculosis, and other once-controlled illnesses are rising as the population becomes more

susceptible to such diseases.

The new farm bill does nothing to improve this situation. There are no emergency measures to produce more food. The bill reauthorizes food stamps and other food assistance programs, and orders that federal spending should gradually increase in these areas. However, even the spending requested is below the current rate of inflation in food prices—well over 10% and rising.

This means, for example, that food stamps and the vouchers of the WIC program (Women, Infants, and Children) will not cover nutrition needs. This year alone, up to 280,000 mothers and infants are being kicked off desperately needed food supplements, because food prices rose higher than WIC allotments.

The only food program expanded in the new farm bill is the provision to "combat fraud and misuse" of food aid programs.

- *Crisis condition of farms.* By 1995, the United States could lose 500,000 farms—the core of the family farm system in the nation—according to a recent report released by the Congressional Budget Office. This is the projected result of the continued fall in income from farming due to prices paid to the farmer being lower than farm costs, and to the ineffectiveness of minimal federal programs to keep farmers in operation.

This report caused a sensation, and House members voted to retain various loan and price support measures for cotton, rice, wheat, corn and other feed grains, oilseeds, and dairy farming. But in no case does the legislation call for parity prices—prices

that will cover the farmers' production and capitalization costs and a fair return. It was parity prices decreed by Washington, D.C. during World War II, that allowed the vast expansion of food for the war effort.

For example, the parity price to the farmer for milk should be over \$24 for 100 pounds. The new bill freezes the minimum support price at \$10.10 per hundredweight, through fiscal 1995.

Farmers get only 50% of parity price for almost every commodity. Therefore, they are going under, or staying in operation by working off-farm jobs, or selling out, and becoming serfs for absentee landowners. Hastening this process, the USDA loan agency, the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), has recently stepped up its foreclosure actions against farmer borrowers.

The beneficiaries of these insane farm programs are the big name food cartel companies: Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Cargill, ConAgra, Continental, Bunge, Louis Dreyfus, and others, which continue to underpay farmers for their output, and thus reap the benefit of the paltry outlays the government makes to keep farmers in business, as de facto peons to the giant companies.

- *Disintegration of agriculture infrastructure.* The U.S. grid of basic inputs for modern agriculture—water supplies, electricity, transportation, land improvements, and so forth—is deteriorating rapidly because of lack of repair and expansion. The new farm bill proposes unprecedented measures to have farmers "adjust" to this, in the name of "sustainable agriculture practice." This is the fancy word for low-technology, primitive farming. The bill authorizes \$40 million annually for research and \$40 million for extension training on how to become a low-tech greenie.