

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

The fraud of 'sustainable agriculture'

Beginning with the Carter years, environmentalists have used real problems to create potential disasters.

The Worldwatch Institute's Lester Brown called for "sustainable agriculture" in recent hearings at the House Agriculture Committee. This marks a new effort by the zero-growth environmentalist lobby to intervene in domestic farm policy.

Brown's policy proposal—contained in a chapter of his forthcoming book, *Building a Sustainable Society*, which Brown pompously offered as testimony at House Agriculture hearings on world hunger July 23—is based on accommodating to an era of "limited resources." Brown documents the deterioration of cropland, the crisis of water supplies and price, the crisis of high-priced energy, the slowed pace of agricultural productivity gains in the United States and, deeming such documentable trends natural and inevitable, bids American policy-makers and producers to wind down their activity and output.

It is a proposal for shutting down American agriculture, historically the most dynamic and productive sector in the economy.

Until the reign of Agriculture Secretary Bob Bergland, the liberal environmentalist lobby did not play a large role in U.S. agriculture policy. Of course, their success in killing nuclear energy development and banning key farm chemicals seriously affected productive agriculture. But the snail darter set hadn't directly laid their hands on domestic farm policy per se.

In fact, Bergland's Agriculture Department was the original launching pad for the "sustainable agriculture" dogma. During the 1980 drought—three years after Carter had killed more than 10 critical water development projects and inflated energy charges had driven irrigation costs sky high—Bob Bergland's emergency aid coordinator Roger Sandman took up an attack on irrigated farming. "Water is not an unlimited resource," Sandman said, and proceeded to advocate the "limited inputs" method of dryland farming despite its lower productivity.

The Carter-Bergland view was carried over into the fight between Carter holdovers and the Reagan progrowth team in the Council on Environmental Quality, the agency that produced the notorious *Global 2000 Report* for President Carter. An early draft of the CEQ's annual report to the President—now under scrutiny by Reagan advisers—contained a section titled "Agriculture: The Transition to an Era of Limited Resources."

There is every indication that Brown and company will get a boost for their project from cohort Frances Moore Lappe and her San Francisco Institute for Food and Development Policy. Lappe, an intimate of brainwasher Werner Erhard of est, also testified at the House hearings and was promptly promoted by the *Washington Post*.

Lappe has a more sophisticated version of the same zero-growth mush, aimed especially at financially squeezed farm producers. Dumping food exports hurts the Third World recipient countries, says Lappe. And expanding production in the United States is ruining our soil and using up scarce resources anyway, she continues.

Like Brown, Lappe ignores or lies about the actual causes of the very real problem confronting American agriculture. The deterioration of American soil is not a "natural" result of chemical fertilizer use—it is the direct result of the lack of profitability in farming that has forced producers to forego those capital investments in future soil productivity.

The problem with farm exports is not, as Lappe demagogically implies, the exports themselves. The problem is the fact that this trade is conducted at price levels that deny the producer the profit necessary for his future productivity. That, and not the trade itself, is what locks American farmers into new cycles of unprofitable production-for-export and at the same time, condemns Third World producers to backwardness and poverty.

At the same hearings on Capitol Hill, American Agriculture Movement President Marvin Meek explained that a parity policy for U.S. agriculture is the first serious step toward solving world hunger.

Meek explained the farmers' point of view: "We see it as in our interest as farmers that other countries are able to develop their own agriculture, because if they do not, they will not have strong enough economies to afford to pay us a fair price for whatever we do export to them."