

Cropland reduction threatens food output

by Wayne Johnston and Marcia Merry

By the estimates of even the U.S. Department of Agriculture—which is famous for overstatement—acreage planted to grain crops this year will be reduced significantly in almost all grains, except oats.

The danger this policy poses to the nation, and to the world food supply, was shown by the 1983 Payment-in-Kind (PIK) program. At that time, farmers were induced by the government to drastically reduce their corn and other grain acreage in exchange for the promise of certificates that they could then sell. When a record-setting drought hit the country on top of this, the result was a 50% drop in corn production and a 60% drop in soybeans—both key animal feeds.

The federal land set-aside programs this year did not feature prominently a repeat PIK plan, but the incentives are designed to pull maximum acres out of production. According to March USDA estimates:

Winter wheat: Fall planting was down to 54 million acres—the smallest since 1979.

Spring wheat: Spring plantings are estimated to be down by at least 3% from last year. There will be seeding on only 14 million acres.

Corn: Spring plantings are estimated to be about 75 million acres, down by 6% from last year, and the smallest planting since 1983, when around 60 million acres were planted under the PIK program. Corn acreage is expected to fall this year by about 7% in a dozen Midwestern states, accounting for 80% of national production.

Grain sorghum: The expected plantings of 15.9 million acres compare only to the 1983 low PIK acreage of 11.9 million acres. Grain sorghum will be down 13% from 1985.

Soybeans: Spring planting is estimated to be 62 million acres, the lowest since 1977.

With this kind of picture, any adverse weather or pest occurrence can cause the same kind of disastrous reductions in harvests as those of 1983. It is already expected that grasshoppers may cause extensive damage because of their build-up in western plains states over the past few seasons, in the absence of proper control measures due to austerity budget cuts. In addition, there are always regional pest and weather problems.

In Texas, there is a confirmed appearance of the Russian wheat aphid. The infestation is located in west Texas wheat

fields, and could reduce yields in as much as 50-70% of the state's wheat acreage. The aphid could reduce yields per acre by as much as 10-30%. Currently, the infested area produces about 17% of the Texas wheat crop. The aphid was first noted in southern Russia at the turn of the century, and traveled across continents, until it finally was confirmed in Mexico's northern state of Coahuila, in 1983.

Anti-food Conservation Reserve.

On top of the large-scale acreage set-aside programs that will cut back grain acreage extensively, an unprecedented food acreage reduction program is now being implemented by the USDA under the title of "Conservation Reserve." This program was passed in the Food Security Act of 1985, under

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the public motivation of being a soil erosion prevention plan. In reality, the program is designed to permanently take huge tracts of land out of food production, and lock them up as wilderness preserves in the manner of feudal land-holdings. According to the USDA, the program aims at "creating better habitat for fish and wildlife."

Figure 4 shows the dimensions of the current program. The plan operates in the following way: During the first quarter this year, farmers owning acreage in areas designated as highly erodible by the USDA, were invited to submit bids on how little financial assistance they wanted per acre to convert their land into non-food grasses or trees, and keep it that way for at least 10 years (in fact, forever).

A total of 44,371 farmers applied, offering over 5 million acres to be taken out of food production. The government accepted 10,302, and intends to reopen bids in the near future. According to Secretary of Agriculture Richard Lyng, the 10,302 farmers will retire 83,356 acres out of production for the next 10 years. He said that the prices per acre agreed upon by this group, ranged from \$5 to \$90 per acre in annual government payments for retiring the land.

The largest number of farms accepted was in the states with the richest land and highest food productivities: the cornbelt states of Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, where 2,183 will take land out of food production. The next

largest number of farms is in the southeastern states, with 1,721; and then the three Lake states, with 1,611.

The issue of soil erosion is a real problem—but its solution lies in high-technology management by independent farm families, with the means to decide and implement scientific soil development programs. The solution of land lock-up is a feudalist trick.

Under the Conservation Reserve, the USDA has designated 104 million acres of American farmland as “fragile,” out of a total of about 421 acres of cropland. The current goal is to permanently remove 45 million acres of this land from food production, within the next five years. This year’s goal is 5 million acres.

The USDA has targeted land for removal from the most productive farm states in the nation, for example, 14.5 million acres from Texas; 10.8 million acres from Iowa; and 4-

5 million acres each from Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, and Missouri.

An analysis of the top 15 agriculture states of the country, which account for most of the national food output, shows how these states are being targeted for food acreage reduction, instead of those Appalachian slopes or other regional erosion areas which common sense would expect to be a conservation “target.”

The top 15 farm states produce 71% of all principal crops, and contain 71% of the acreage designated by the USDA as eligible for the Conservation Reserve. Of this year’s goal of removing 5 million acres out of crop production, fully 3.535 million acres are in the top 15 states. These states account for 83% of national corn production, 70% of wheat production, 75% of soybean production, and 85% of sorghum production.

FIGURE 4
Farms taking cropland out of production
(For the USDA Conservation Reserve, as of March 1986)

Region	Farms submitted	Farms accepted	Region	Farms submitted	Farms accepted
Cornbelt			Southern Plains		
Iowa	4,235	742	Texas	3,795	161
Missouri	3,760	637	Total	4,530	331
Illinois	2,618	540	Southeast		
Indiana	1,481	157	Florida	333	157
Ohio	872	107	Georgia	1,574	832
Total	12,996	2,183	Alabama	868	456
Lake states			South Carolina	360	276
Minnesota	3,303	1,079	Total	3,135	1,721
Wisconsin	1,210	424	Appalachian		
Michigan	528	108	Virginia	325	114
Total	5,041	1,611	West Virginia	23	3
Northern Plains			Tennessee	2,296	716
Kansas	2,142	681	Kentucky	1,742	382
Nebraska	2,153	415	North Carolina	595	182
South Dakota	728	136	Total	4,981	1,397
North Dakota	998	112	Northeast states		
Total	6,021	1,344	Maine	109	26
Delta states			Vermont	2	1
Arkansas	380	160	New Hampshire	1	0
Mississippi	1,223	665	Massachusetts	6	3
Louisiana	108	33	Connecticut	2	0
Total	1,639	858	New York	262	87
Mountain states			Pennsylvania	397	93
Colorado	1,079	214	New Jersey	18	4
Montana	1,163	46	Delaware	11	0
Wyoming	54	7	Maryland	95	8
Utah	172	40	Rhode Island	0	0
Nevada	5	0	Total	903	222
New Mexico	438	115	Pacific states		
Arizona	0	0	California	60	19
Idaho	1,090	45	Oregon	305	69
Total	4,001	467	Washington	759	80
Southern Plains			Total	1,124	168
Oklahoma	735	170	Totals	44,371	10,302

Source: USDA