

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

A 'bonus' to return land to the wild

The U.S. Department of Agriculture ought to be renamed the "U.S. Department of Wilderness."

On Jan. 20, Secretary of Agriculture Richard Lyng made one of his first policy announcements of the new year, and it was typical of his subservience to the food-cartel companies. Lyng offered a financial bonus for those corn growers who enroll in a special program to retire their corn acreage from production for at least 10 years.

The bonus plan will pay \$2.00 per bushel for the corn you don't grow the first year after enrolling. The sign-up period for the new program is Feb. 9-27, and the bonus can be paid for either the 1987 or the 1988 crop. The land retired under the program goes into the "Conservation Reserve," a fancy name for land "un-improvement," that was established by the infamous "National Food Security Act of 1985."

Most pleased with this new Lyng program is the environmentalist lobby in Washington. It serves as a front for food-cartel interests, by claiming that food "overproduction" causes soil erosion. And, "therefore," food production should be reduced. Old oligarchical interests behind the food-trade companies are moving now to reduce independent food output potential here and abroad, and to dominate remaining food production and trade.

Speaking for this viewpoint, but in acceptable, "environmentalist" language, a spokesman for the Conservation Foundation, Kenneth Cook, said he was "highly pleased" with Lyng's corn land conversion deal. "This is the way to reduce that competition and place more and more of

the weight of production control on the conservation reserve."

The Conservation Foundation wrote the script for the crazy "Conservation Reserve Program" land-retirement scheme that Congress passed in December 1985. The goal of this program is to remove 45 million acres from U.S. crop production, out of a total of 410 million total acres farmed—17%! In the three enrollment periods over 1986, farmers removed 8.9 million acres from production under the "Reserve" scheme. USDA officials forecast that another 6 million acres will be enrolled this year.

Farmers who contract to remove corn land from production will get their acreage "bonus" on top of any other compensation they may receive for putting this and other crop acreage into the Conservation Reserve Program. The corn growers will be paid in generic "crop certificates," with which they can obtain grain from government stocks, or, more commonly, sell the certificates to the grain cartel companies, which then redeem them for government food stocks, whenever and wherever the trade companies wish, all at government expense.

With a straight face, Lyng repeated all the "conservationist" litany: The purpose of the corn land removal "bonus" is to reduce food production, and to save soils: "Since a paid land diversion is in effect under the 1987 feed grain program to restrain further build-up of corn stocks, this rental payment is being offered to encourage highly erodible, excess corn acreage into

long-term conservation use."

But the real problem with erosion and land deterioration is that farmers have not had the income in recent years to carry out necessary land improvements. Farm buildings, farm equipment, and farm families themselves are also worn out.

The acreage reduction planned for the 1987 U.S. season, in addition to the mass shutdown of farms because of the depression, spells catastrophe. Lyng has put into effect the maximum land set-aside requirements for corn and other crops, in order for farmers to participate in the most minimal subsidy programs. And, it is the USDA's purpose to take this land out of production permanently.

As the Conservation Foundation knows, the immediate impact of these measures is to accelerate shutdown of the country's farm infrastructure. Farm input suppliers—seed, fertilizer, and equipment merchants, among others—are all going under.

The charge that all this is necessary in order to reduce "burdensome crop surpluses" is simply a lie. No "surpluses" exist, especially of corn—the prime animal feedstock. What is happening is that there is a temporary pile-up and carryover of corn in the United States because world trade volume has collapsed, at the same time that domestic utilization of corn for livestock has also decreased—meat animal numbers (cattle and hogs) are at their lowest levels in 20 years. According to USDA figures, there will be a record corn supply of 5.7 billion bushels before the 1987 harvest. This may sound large, compared to the 6.6 billion bushels of corn that will be sold this season. But any serious grain reserve coupled with a serious livestock building program, would literally "eat up" the carryover.