

Agriculture by Robert L. Baker

Dry weather endangers Midwest crops

A time bomb is ticking in the U.S. farm community, but USDA officials are choosing to ignore it.

A recent crop condition survey conducted by *EIR* indicates that U.S. grain crops and soybeans again face a disaster due to poor weather. For thousands of farmers, "This may be the last season forever," after two weather disasters in a row, in the words of one exasperated farmer.

Iowa, the nation's largest corn producer, has experienced the seventh driest January-June period on record. The corn crop is now entering the pollination period there, which lasts about 10-15 days. This is the most critical time, during which pollen falls from the tassel to fertilize the moist silk threads which start to appear on the ear. If the soil is dry and hot winds occur during this period, the silks will dehydrate and will not be fertilized by the falling pollen, thus leaving only a corn stalk with no kernels developing on the cob.

Reports from both northwestern and southeastern Iowa indicate that subsoil moisture is non-existent. The period from about July 4 through July 11 saw temperatures consistently over 100°F, with hot dry winds causing the corn to dry up. If rain doesn't fall within five to ten days after this baking spell, farmers in the area warn, "Kiss the corn crop good-bye."

They have had good reason to worry. The 30-day July forecast called for drier and warmer than normal weather. Then the National Weather Service released a new report July 10 predicting cooler temperatures and rain.

State agricultural officials in North Dakota—the spring wheat region—

said the state will have a \$541 million crop loss in 1989, even if rain begins in mid-July. Carl Fanning, Extension Service agronomist for North Dakota State University, says that North Dakota "will lose 34% of its spring wheat crop and 24% of its durum wheat crop.

On top of this, there is an estimated \$80 million loss in hay and pasture. North Dakota used to be called the "breadbasket of the world" in terms of corn, the average corn height in the state by this time of year is 41 inches. But in many places the corn is only 5-10 inches tall.

In South Dakota, 95% of the topsoil moisture is short to critically short, and 58% of the subsoil moisture is critically short. Many farmers are cutting small grains for hay, fearing that it will not make it to maturity.

Grasshoppers have become a plague under the perfect 1988-89 dry-weather breeding conditions. Minnesota and North Dakota farmers have already been forced to spray many times for grasshoppers which have been devouring entire fields of hay and grain. Here the blame can be laid directly on the world's worst destroyers of the environment, i.e., the environmentalists themselves. Namely, the set-aside acres placed in the ten-year Conservation Reserve Program have become breeding grounds for hoppers and other pests, as the dry weather has allowed billions of bug eggs to mature and now hatch.

Meanwhile, in the Southern states, the problem is too much water. "Everyone I've talked to says the crop conditions here are the worst they've

ever seen," due to excess moisture, a Mississippi soybean farmer told *EIR* "It's rained 22 days in June and every day except today in July," he said. Over 500,000 acres of planted crops are under 5-7 feet of water in the Mississippi Delta region. About 85% of the soybeans are planted in this region, but 50% are drowned out, and it has been too wet to put up any hay.

Eastern Seaboard and Ohio Valley farm regions have also been deluged with water, rains running about 20% above normal. The crops that serve the dairy farms of Pennsylvania—hay, barley, and corn—are all in trouble. Hay has been left uncut. Corn has been planted very late, or not at all. "Coming on top of last year, in which there were cash flow problems . . . it's going to impact on farm families everywhere," is the view of Jan Carson, news director for the Pennsylvania Farmers' Association.

Meanwhile, the USDA wants the public to believe everything is great. The headline on the July 6, issue of *Agri News*, a Minnesota newspaper, declares, "Farm Economy Rebound to Continue," and claims that "The nation's farm economy is in its third year of recovery, and an Agriculture Department analyst says no serious downturn is likely in the next few years."

The July 1989 issue of the USDA publication *Agricultural Outlook* projects 1989 farm equity to increase by \$35-45 billion over 1988. But on closer evaluation, one finds that of all the assets evaluated (real estate, livestock, machinery, stored crops, and financial assets) the only asset that is projected to increase in value is *farmland*. In other words, the great "farm recovery" is based on inflated land values due to another round of land speculation, and certainly not to real physical wealth production.