

Agriculture by Robert L. Baker

The 'Hunger Law' of 1990

Yeutter's new farm bill means hunger in the decade to come. Will a "pro-food" lobby activate against it?

With much pomp and ceremony, Agriculture Secretary Clayton Yeutter released the administration's new five-year farm bill. Though the document was simply called "1990 Farm Bill: Proposal of the Administration," it should be named the "Hunger Law of 1990."

The bill will make food more and more scarce, pauperize farmers, and give the food export cartel companies live-or-die control over food supplies. At the same time, the government proposes to assume sweeping powers over land and farm practices, in the name of protecting the environment.

To disguise the nature of the bill, the USDA has developed high-flown rhetoric about its goals. A 48-page "Questions and Answers" document was given to the press. The USDA says, "The basic themes of our farm bill proposal are increasing market orientation, improving international competitiveness, and addressing environmental concerns. . . . The administration's proposal enhances the resource stewardship of American farmers through greater production flexibility, incentives to change resource use in environmentally sensitive areas, and further research and technical assistance."

There is no mention of the shortages here or abroad, nor of the crisis facing farmers being ruined by debt and low prices.

Wheat stocks have fallen to their lowest levels since the early 1970s. Livestock herds are way down. There are regional milk shortages.

Already, there are food shortages in the U.S. food chain. In 1989, the

USDA cut many commodities distributed to food banks, soup kitchens, and supplemental programs for the elderly and the young.

Since fall 1989, the cuts in commodities to school districts have caused widespread deprivation among school children, thousands of whom are being forced to go without lunch (one-third of their daily nutrition) because they can't afford the price hikes. The Feb. 1 *Los Angeles Times* ran a story on the crisis in California, headlined, "Surplus Food Cuts Starve Lunch Programs in School."

In his new budget, President Bush, "the education President," called for a \$1.2 billion cut in money to school districts.

The question is, will the Democrats organize a "pro-food" opposition to the administration's "let them starve" attitude to the needy?

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, has called a full Senate hearing on Feb. 27 on the topic, "Hunger in America."

But congressmen in both the Democratic and Republican parties support the kind of radical environmentalist and free trade policies that will guarantee food shortages. The same day as Yeutter's press conference, Sen. Wyche Fowler (D-Ga.) joined a gaggle of eco-freaks, including the American Farmland Trust and the National Wildlife Federation, to release a report on their goals for the farm bill.

There will be little disagreement with most of the administration's proposals to continue the "controlled dis-

integration" of high-technology family farming.

Some of the proposals are:

- Farm price and income supports: To further the push toward low-input ("sustainable") agriculture, the administration recommends allowing farmers flexibility to plant a variety of crops on their USDA-designated crop acreage base, as well as allowing the producer to even plant on the idled acres. Federal farmer benefits will be based on acres planted, rather than total bushels produced. The current system of base acreage-designation is a straitjacket for farmers, but the new system just marginalizes independent farmers in a new way.

- Acreage Reduction Programs (ARPs) are proposed to be tied to a grain stocks-to-use ratio, rather than the current method of tying the ARP-idled acres to the total ending grain stocks. The end-of-year safety levels of stocks for many crops—for example, rice—have been designated since the 1940s. But under the Yeutter system, if consumers eat less now, then they stand to have even less in the future!

- Repeal Federal Crop Insurance legislation and establish a standing disaster assistance program.

- Food stamps: A new project will test replacing food stamps with Big Brother "electronic benefit transfer" systems. New and tougher penalties are proposed against food stamp fraud, and a federal strike force seeking abusers will be deployed.

- Farmers Home Administration programs are proposed to implement tougher credit standards and shorter time limits for repayments on farm loans.

- The Conservation Reserve Program in the 1990 Farm Bill would provide for the extension of the current CRP enrollment to include croppped wetlands.