

Agriculture by Rosa Tennenbaum

World food shortages worsen

A German farm expert looks at the insanity of agrarian policy in the light of the latest FAO report.

'Agricultural overproduction" has long been viewed by a misinformed public as a major evil—and who should be surprised, since this refrain has been trumpeted up and down the land for years? Yet the real situation could not more drastically contradict this fictional picture.

The latest world food supply report of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) shows no surplus, but alarmingly low food stocks worldwide. This year, wheat and feedgrain crops will probably rise slightly, compared to last year's very low level, yet production remains below longstanding trends, according to the FAO report, released in April. In this fiscal year, which ends June 30, world food stockpiles will be reduced by a further 30 million tons to only 314 million tons, and there is no hope for a recovery next year.

The wheat situation is especially tenuous. The crop is only expected to reach the minimum requirements in the current fiscal year. Feedgrain production will likely suffice, because the demand for meat, and hence for feedgrains, remains low. In the case of rice, too, supplies are extremely stretched. Because of this market situation, grain prices on the world markets have tended to hold up. Thus, export prices for wheat in April were around 40% above 1991.

The FAO finds this picture, in the face of the fact that a whole series of nations will need to import more grain, "disquieting." The grim situations in Africa and in the former Sovi-

et Union are especially striking. In most countries of southern Africa, the worst drought in decades has wiped out the grain harvest. Even the Republic of South Africa and Zimbabwe, the region's breadbaskets, which usually can fill any deficit in neighboring countries with exports, will have to import considerable grain this year.

Twenty-six million people in 14 countries are hit by the drought catastrophe, warns Germany's World Food Aid: Africa is threatened with "the worst famine of the century." That is saying something, considering the deadly famines which have swept through the continent in the last 20 years. Angola, Somalia, and Namibia alone need 12 million tons of grain, if the worst is to be prevented. Even if the huge quantities of food aid needed by the southern part of the continent alone are supplied, there is a danger that logistical barriers will keep it from being shipped to hungry people fast enough.

The situation in the Community of Independent States is also precarious. Last year, the grain harvest fell by some 27%, sugar production dropped 19%, meat by 7%, and milk by 6%. Supplies to the population worsened even more sharply. While prices of basic food commodities rose in the first quarter of 1992 by 1,100-1,200%, farm production compared to 1991 sank by 20-25%. Food availability worsened by about a third, according to the official Committee for Statistics in Moscow. In the first two months of 1992 wholesalers sold 59% less sugar, 33% less eggs, and 28%

less butter. In dairy products sales were about half, while they fell two-thirds in meat, sausage, and fish.

Hunger rules in many other parts of the globe; in all, starvation stalks some 100 million people. One would think that is reason enough to undertake every imaginable effort to ease this boundless misery. Instead, not only is the production of vital commodities like bread drastically reduced, but more and more food and fodder are being reprocessed as plastics or fuels.

Further reductions in grain prices, which the European Parliament has already approved to a level of 20%, will cause the production of cereals and hence of meat and dairy products to fall drastically. Meanwhile, in Heideck, Bavaria, not long ago the first energy plant running on vegetable oil came on line, and in Freiburg, another German city, 20 taxis recently began driving using vegetable oil.

The myth of agricultural overproduction wrecks one's ability to think logically, and a classic example is U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Edward Madigan. At the same time that his Department of Agriculture put out figures showing that U.S. flour stocks were too low to fulfill government's food aid programs for the poor, Madigan announced that an incisive step will be undertaken to reduce the grain surplus: Plates, cups, and saucers will be manufactured out of flour, which the users, after the meal is consumed, will no longer need to wash, but will rather eat up. What an achievement! Instead of giving flour for homeless shelters, schools and kindergartens, hospitals, and other social institutions, now there would be flour in the form of a "reconstituted raw material" to replace plastic dishes. The fact that U.S. grain stockpiles had fallen to an all-time historic low, had apparently not yet sunk in to the secretary.