

Agriculture by Suzanne Rose

Hunger stalks the United States

One in ten is already going hungry, and ever less food is available for food aid programs.

A study released by Second Harvest, the leading food bank network in the United States, at the end of March, reveals that 1 in 10 Americans is going hungry. This incredible rate is not unlike that in many developing nations, according to J. Larry Brown of the Center on Hunger, Poverty, and Nutrition Policy at Tufts University, the March 31 *AgriNews* reported.

Says Brown, "Hunger is at epidemic proportions." According to the report, children account for half of the 26 million Americans who rely on food pantries and soup kitchens for food. Many of those surveyed in the study who are forced to rely on government handouts have at least one employed wage-earner in the family. Although Second Harvest-affiliated food banks feed 26 million people, many more are missed by them. Brown states that the number of hungry is minimally 30 million.

At least 20% of respondents to the study reported they are worried about the source of their next meal, and 32% reported skipping meals.

Apart from the growing number of Americans who rely on Food Stamps (which has risen to an astronomical level of 27 million over the last decade) and food pantries, there is mounting evidence of less food available for food pantries to distribute. Food banks report that cash donations are down, as well as the amount of government-donated commodities. While visits to food pantries in Minnesota have risen dramatically since 1980, the Food Shelf Association reported to *AgriNews* that there was a 50% decrease in cash donations to buy the food last year.

A research director for the Minneapolis-based Urban Coalition said that demand for donated food has increased steadily in the past decade. Individual visits to Minnesota food shelves rose from 180,000 in 1982 to 1.4 million in 1992. Some 446,000 households in Minnesota, home of the agri-business cartel Cargill, used food shelves in 1992. A Willmar-area food shelf has reportedly been mobbed by people affected by last year's flooding.

AgriNews reports that the 1995 budget proposal of the Clinton administration is to eliminate federal spending on commodities distributed to food banks under The Emergency Food Assistance Program. TEFAP purchases food and agricultural commodities for food assistance and victims of natural disasters. Hundreds of thousands of pounds of TEFAP food were distributed after the Los Angeles earthquake. The program spent \$145 million to purchase commodities in 1993, but was cut to \$120 million in 1994. These cuts affected an estimated 8 million households, according to the newsletter of the Grange.

One of the consequences of a free trade policy in agriculture, or declining government intervention to protect the individual producer and the agricultural economy from the rapaciousness of the multinational food cartels, which policy was given a boost with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement last year, has been the decline in surplus foods or commodities available for food assistance for the hungry. To put more food in cartel-controlled channels, government price support pro-

grams have been drastically cut for grain and dairy since the 1985 Farm Bill. Therefore, less food goes into government stocks to be made available for programs for the needy. Currently, grain crop stocks are at an historically low supply-to-use ratio, exacerbated by last year's flooding in the corn belt.

The policy to keep stocks low (and put farmers out of business) also affects the availability of food aid abroad. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's provisional estimate of total food aid availability of cereals for 1993-94 stands at 11.8 million tons, compared to 15.2 million tons in 1993-94. Only 7.8 million tons is expected to be provided to developing countries, well below levels provided to these countries in previous years. The need is increasing in Russia, Africa, and parts of central Europe.

In other crop areas where the government gives contracts to food processors to remove surpluses from the market and make them available for school lunch programs and food assistance, the requirement that such foods be domestically grown is causing drastic reductions in the availability of such items as tomatoes and beans. One source reports that the processing company which supplies tomatoes for government food programs will not have a contract this year because of the shortage of domestically grown tomatoes, as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Under NAFTA, the incentive is for growers and processors to move into low-wage Mexican production.

A domestic production shortage to supply government contracts for food aid is also being reported for dried beans. The major bean-processing plant reportedly had to scramble to find beans grown domestically to fill a government contract.