

Agriculture by Sue Atkinson

USDA shuts down rural America

The farm production decline means a population decline in the small towns and disappearance of businesses.

Small-town, rural America is disappearing. Despite all the federal government rhetoric in recent years about "development perspectives for rural America," etc., if you look around in the farm states, people are disappearing.

In Iowa, for example, there is a negative population growth rate. Not overnight, but gradually, people are migrating to metropolitan areas. What is causing this phenomenon? The shutting down of the family farm-based production section of our agricultural economy.

Several years ago, a government study concluded that only large corporate farms were efficient. Therefore, the government, in its "infinite wisdom," decided that official farm policy would be the encouragement of large corporate farming.

There has been a lot of talk about help for the small, family farm, but USDA policy—especially during the tenure of U.S. Agriculture Undersecretary Daniel Amstutz, the 25-year Cargill executive who led the USDA from 1983 to 1987—has fostered the mass shift over into food cartel-connected corporate farm and processing system.

According to the latest Census Bureau survey, the number of Americans now living "down on the farm" has dwindled to 4,986,000, the lowest number in over a century. This does not represent the large-scale application of farm technologies, and increased productivities, but rather, the displacement of the family farm system, by vertically integrated corporate-owned food production, or by the

shutdown of output capacity.

This has had a severe ripple effect on all phases of farm input industries—equipment, fuel, fertilizers, etc. There have been mass layoffs in farm machinery-manufacturing centers. Equipment imports have increased.

How has the government handled this situation? Why, it adopted an official farm policy of discouraging food production. The subsidy payments kept certain larger farms in business, but the smaller ones have been gradually liquidated.

This, by the way, shows what is now on the agenda for family farms in Western Europe, where the USDA policies are now being imitated by the European Community in its plans for restructuring farm policy between now and 1992.

All the while, the government, and major media and others, argue that farms are expendable because they have been producing "too much food." In line with the prevalent zero-population-growth outlook, the USDA calls for less food to be produced.

With less food being produced, naturally the demand for seeds and chemicals drops even further. Supply outlet stores and companies have been forced to either go out of business or be taken over by larger, more diversified corporations.

The people being forced out of food production, out of machinery production, out of seed production, out of chemical production, and the associated sales and administration jobs have been in the age group 20-60. These are the child-rearing years, the income-producing years, the so-

ciety-contributing years. The wants and needs of this group of people create the jobs for most of the service sector.

As these people leave an area, the demand for services decreases and the costs of providing the services to those remaining increase.

Eventually, the businesses involved in services cannot remain open, and they, too, close. People associated with those businesses leave to find work elsewhere.

The state of Iowa, which is over 80% rural, recently completed a study of what was happening in its rural areas. During the 1980s, the rural areas lost 20% of their grocery stores, 22% of their movie theaters, 29% of their variety stores, 35% of their gas stations and apparel stores, 49% of their student enrollment.

When you consider the fact that many small towns only have one of each of these businesses, it is devastating to the area to have them leave.

Just what is lost? Lost are the income taxes of those people not on retirement income, the income taxes of businesses, and property taxes (due to a reduction of property values). This is the money used by local, county, and state governments to fund the infrastructure. Infrastructure decay is becoming rampant as these government agencies try to prioritize needs against decreasing tax revenues.

Many once-thriving agriculture-based communities are now in their final death throes. Each one is hoping some production plant will locate there so they will not fade into oblivion.

Unfortunately there is not enough production left in this country to save all of these towns. Because production is being either eliminated or transferred to other countries, America is dying the same way small towns are dying.