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We Need Farmers to Maintain It

Congress and the President have approved farm programs calling for large expenditures in spite of the large federal budget deficit. This is consistent with the results of a New York Times/CBS News poll summarized in the February 25 New York Times. It found widespread public support for government assistance to financially distressed farmers. A majority of respondents were willing to pay more taxes to keep farmers from losing their land. This support, according to the poll, reflects a widely held belief in the essential nobility of farmers and rural life. Of the 1,174 adults polled, 58 percent agreed with the statement, "Farm life is more honest and moral than life in the rest of the country." Two thirds agreed that "farmers are more hard working than most other Americans."

Why do people long and far removed from the rural environment have great sympathy for farmers—even to the point of paying taxes to support record budgets for farm programs? There are probably many reasons. But one important reason is that farmers maintain in rural

America a vast "national park" which includes landscapes, communities, cultures, institutions, and values. Farmers individually and collectively are the park's custodians as they manage the tangible assets of rural America, but they are also an integral part of the park itself as they preserve and represent an intangible, an even inexpressible part of our culture.

Viewed in this light, farmers are seen as providers of a valuable non-market social service. Moreover, their ability to provide this service may depend on the maintenance of a certain critical mass of farms, farmers, and farm families—a critical mass below which even the loss of a few farms might jeopardize a national treasure house. A public perception that today's farms constitute this critical mass could explain why financially distressed farmers capture public sympathy now after 50 years of farm consolidation went nearly unnoticed. If this is true, then public concern may be entirely appropriate, and not easily allayed by assurances that the nation's food supply is not threatened.

National debate on farm policy certainly reflects the political power of the

sympathy for farmers. However, economists and commodity group leaders are slow to articulate what lies beneath emotionally charged abstractions such as nostalgia for family farms and the wholesomeness of rural life. Unfortunately, they too often purposely focus debate on narrowly defined economic issues. Commodity groups need to recognize that their various policy agendas must somehow respond to public concerns for the rural "park" and its people. As for economists, they ought to provide the analysis needed for informed public choices by a society very concerned about rural affairs. Developing the tools to incorporate social costs and benefits in calculations of economic efficiency is a challenge for economists. It is also an opportunity for them to engage the public in a mutually beneficial dialogue on the role of rural America in the nation's future.

Granted, many farmers today may not be needed for their food production. However, it is conceivable that they are needed to prevent our agricultural areas from eventually turning into vast "green deserts" devoid of any human dimension. **■**

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Have You Heard . . .

. . . the state of Illinois has three programs to provide financial relief to selected Illinois residents actively engaged in farming?

The Farm Credit Payment Adjustment Program provides for buying down one-half of the interest cost on operating loans provided to farmers by local financial institutions. The amount of buy down is to be repaid without interest by the farmer over a 5 year period.

The Farm Debt Relief Program provides up to \$2,000 to reduce outstanding farm related debt for individuals with debt to asset ratios exceeding .70. This assistance is a grant.

The State Guarantee Program calls for guarantees of 85% on loans for which the lender lowers the interest rates to 250 points over 1 year T-Bill rates. To qualify for the program the debt to asset ratio must be between .40 to .65. Nearly \$80 million dollars of loans have

been approved under the State Guarantee Program, the most active of the three. Contributed by David Lins and Wesley Seitz, University of Illinois.

Have You Read . . .

Emerging Issues in the Rural Economy of the South

. . . a publication that reports on a January 1986 conference attended by people interested in economic conditions in the rural South and the forces that cause them? Topics included values and attitudes, transportation, and education, as well as a focus on agricultural resources.

If you wonder why conditions are what they are in your community, even if it isn't in the South, get a copy. For this publication will stimulate your thinking about the many forces that impinge on your community and make it what it is. It is published by the Southern Rural Development Center, Box 5406, Miss. State, MS 39762. The cost is \$6.

Have You Read . . .

Trend Analysis of Weekly Acid Rain Data, 1978-83, a U. S. Geological Survey Report?

The conclusion that acidity conditions have not changed is based on analysis of 1978 through 1983 data for 19 sites—with all but three east of the Mississippi. The analysis showed "no clear pattern of changes in overall acidity, as measured by pH but did show significant declines in sulfate and nitrate concentrations." The data used in the study related to only a limited number of stations. Even so, it is important, the authors, Terry Schertz and Robert Hirsch, point out, because it is the first trend analysis of precipitation chemistry to depend on weekly data of precipitation chemistry. The 64-page report is available from Open File Service Section, U.S. Geological Survey, Box 25046, Federal Center, Denver, Colorado 80225. Paper copies cost \$10.25, microfiche \$4.00. The report number is WRIR 85-4211.