

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

Get a horse!

Agriculture Secretary Bergland does not believe in farmers' using machines, fertilizers and insecticides.

I do not think that federal funding for labor-saving devices is a proper use of federal money," Agriculture Secretary Bergland told a California audience last December. Bergland's preference for cheap, manual labor over machines is as repugnant to American industry's working people as to farm producers. University researchers, producers and agribusinessmen were up in arms over Bergland's pronouncements. Letters were fired off to the White House demanding that Bergland retract the statement and issue a policy "clarification."

Secretary Bergland, refusing to retract the statement, instead restated his policy in a speech and press release at the end of January. The December outburst was not just an idle remark. At the time, a law suit against the University of California had been making its way through the state courts to prevent tax dollars from being used to support research that allegedly benefits private, not public interests. The suit, brought by the so-called California Rural Legal Assistance project, centers on the development of a mechanical tomato picker at UC-Davis, where a prototype lettuce picker has also been developed. The CRLA maintains not only that the mechanical harvesting machinery is increasing

tomato production but is eliminating thousands of stoop labor jobs. This, according to the CRLA, is contrary to the public interest.

At last report, the Alameda County superior court judge trying the case has opted to ignore the important issue of whether or not these technological developments benefit the public, and has instead narrowed his consideration to three points concerning possible conflict of interest of university officials with holdings in agribusiness and the like.

This was the context in which Bergland repeated his policy statement. "We will not put federal money into research where—other factors being equal or neutral—the major effect of that research will be the replacing of an adequate and willing workforce with machines."

Bergland also added that up to now, too much emphasis has been put on the value of productivity gains resulting from new farm technology, and not enough attention has been paid to the "social costs" of adopting new technologies.

Bergland stated explicitly his doubts about the future viability of high-technology farming and of highly mechanized farms, because, as he put it in the policy clarification, "we no longer have cheap

and abundant supplies of energy. And we have learned that mechanical and chemical technology can exact a high price in terms of erosion, pollution, and human health."

As he has stated repeatedly, Bergland emphasized that research monies should be devoted to finding ways to reduce the use of fertilizer, pesticides and petroleum.

To implement this policy, Bergland set up a committee of consumer and farm representatives that is charged with sorting out the "public" interest from the "private," socially harmful research categories. One of the co-chairmen of this committee is USDA Deputy Director of the Office of Economics, Policy Analysis, and Budget, Susan Sechler. Ms. Sechler told *Science* magazine recently that work was going slowly because of the controversial nature of the subject, and stressed that great care was being taken to be fair. Ms. Sechler hastened to add, however, that she is convinced that agriculture has become, as she put it, "a tremendously overmechanized industry," and that every effort should be made to draw the line on research projects that could accelerate mechanization.

The odor of the virulently anti-technology "Agriculture Accountability Project," inspired by Ralph Nader and targetted by this news service three years ago as having an inordinate influence on the Carter Agriculture Department, is unmistakable in Chairman Bergland's mechanization policy. Incredibly, according to the May 9 issue of *Science*, this "policy clarification" has stilled at least some of the angry farm voices from California.