

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

U.S. food assistance stocks depleted

But the national food policy remains the same as before: to create scarcity.

This spring, federal government agencies announced the curtailment of major food assistance programs. At the same time, federal statistics—notorious for overstating food inventories—report significant declines in U.S. meat animal and dairy herds. Relative to domestic needs for improved nutrition, and international requirements for fighting starvation, U.S. food stocks and output potential are being marginalized. Yet the functioning of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Congress, and the judiciary has been to promote food scarcity, and to allow the unprecedented takeover of control over food processing and marketing by a small number of international food cartel companies.

In March, the government rice and honey inventories for food donations were gone. In May, the federally stored cheese and non-fat dried milk powder stocks will be depleted. These food items are some of the products that are in government storage because of the stated intent of the federal commodity programs to smooth out market price fluctuations for farmers, and to maintain the food supply system for the public. Both the media and the government alike used the ploy of calling these stocks food “surpluses” instead of food “reserves,” as in the children’s game, “Now you see them, now you don’t.” Under cover of worrying about bulging food “surpluses,” the USDA is acting to both gut food reserves and undercut output potential alike.

Millions of people are directly affected by the food donation cutbacks.

Thanks to the collapse known as the “Reagan recovery,” as many as 18 million people have been receiving some form of free food each month as of 1987. One in seven Americans gets some type of free food at some point each year. Even before the current food assistance cutbacks, malnutrition was growing steadily in the United States. In March, the Senate Agriculture Committee planned hearings on the scope of malnutrition in rural areas, where there is only limited access to the USDA’s Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program. Fully 41% of those using the TEFAP regard it as their regular source of food. Now Congress is considering eliminating the program.

Even those “better off” cannot rest assured of their food supply. The number of cattle in the United States has now declined to 99 million head—a drop of 3% over last year, down to the lowest level since 1961. The number of milk cows, 10.3 million head, is the smallest number since 1872, according to recent USDA figures. Despite the dramatic increases in the milk output per cow, and the use of refrigeration, the current decline in meat and milk animals represents a food supply threat, not a productivity advance.

The national swine inventory is also shrinking relative to national needs of pork per capita. The number of family hog farm operations has declined drastically. In 1965, when the USDA started keeping records, there were 104,000 hog farms; in 1975 there were 74,000 farms. In 1985 there were

43,000 hog farms, and last year, only 39,000 farms. In all of its recent hog inventory reports, the USDA has expressed official “surprise” at the lack of growth in hog numbers. Yet the decrease in hog farm operations makes the drop in hog numbers obvious.

While these declines are taking place, and farmers are being dispossessed in mass numbers, the USDA has also concentrated on implementing annual land set-aside programs to cut the production of “unwanted” feed and food grains. The sign-up deadline for the current commodity cropland set-aside is April 15. In addition, the sixth sign-up period is under way for the federal Conservation Reserve Program, to permanently remove land from production in the name of preventing unwanted food and saving soil. As of last summer there were a total of 23 million acres locked up in this program, out of a goal of 45 million acres to be arranged in the next few years. This represents over 15% of the total U.S. cropland base acreage.

As these measures are taken to cut back national food output and production potential, cartel food companies have moved into control positions in processing and distribution. For example, at present only three giant companies dominate hog slaughtering: IBP (owned by Armand Hammer and Occidental Petroleum), Excel Corp. (owned by Cargill Inc.), and Swift Independent, run by the giant ConAgra Inc. The current hog-slaughtering capacity of the “big three” of the pork industry are IBP, 11 million hogs a year; ConAgra (Swift), 6 million; and Excel, 6 million.

These same three companies are also the nation’s largest beef processors. In 1985, the three companies killed 41% of all grain-fed beef cattle. Last year, the percentage killed jumped to 68%. Cargill is also the nation’s largest commercial hog feeder.