

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Don't blame the earthquake

Fruit and vegetable prices are on the rise, but the California earthquake is only a small part of the reason.

If you've been following the news of the impact of the California earthquake on the agricultural regions of the state, you will have seen many a sorry picture of destroyed foods.

In Hollister, the quake collapsed warehouse buildings containing some 400,000 tons of the summer's tomato crop. In nearby Watsonville—the frozen food capital of the country—an ammonia leak at the Green Giant plant caused \$20 million in losses to frozen Brussels sprouts, broccoli, and other vegetables. Six other processing plants in the city were also damaged. In Freedom, just north of Watsonville, thousands of pounds of apples were knocked out of their bins at the H.A. Rider and Sons cider plant.

The earthquake also knocked out power to many irrigation systems and processing plants, and blocked many roads normally used to take crops to market. Agriculture-related damages are still being tallied, but damage in Santa Cruz County alone, the location of the quake's epicenter, could amount to \$5-6 million, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

However, don't blame the high and rising prices you see in the supermarkets for fresh produce, or for canned and frozen fruits and vegetables, on the California earthquake—whose effects will ripple out through the nation soon enough. What is shown in the last 24 months of rising prices and shorter supplies of produce, is the result of years of deliberate marginalization of the farm sector for fruits and vegetables, perpetrated by the U.S. Department of Agricul-

ture, the Environmental Protection Agency, and other federal government branches on behalf of the food cartel companies.

The major factors involved are: financial hardship of the farmers; crazed environmentalist restrictions on usage of water and fertilizer, and on other farm practices; the lack of development of infrastructure for large-scale water and power for irrigation, as well as railways, roads, and bridges for transport to market; and finally, the imposition of "free trade" in the world food market, which has undercut farmers from many nations.

California accounted for 49% of the total production of fresh vegetables in the United States in 1987. Cash receipts from the sale of California vegetables totaled \$3.1 billion in 1987, which is one-third of all U.S. vegetable receipts. Almost all the acreage for these crops is irrigated. However, even before the earthquake hit, California farmers had suffered the impact of three dry years, and state and federal stalling on building new water projects. In addition, heavy restrictions are coming down on farm chemicals needed for vegetable and fruit crops.

Therefore, when a disaster hits on the scale of the 1988 "Killer Drought" or the 1989 earthquake, there is no cushion in the food chain to ease the situation until everything is back in production again. Food stocks are low; farmers are going out of operation.

For an example outside California, take processed vegetables. Because of the 1988 drought, the nation-

al "pea pack"—the canning of peas (centered in Minnesota and adjacent areas) fell last year by about half. As of January, the national U.S. stocks of canned peas were half of what they were in January 1988, and less than half of January 1987 stocks. At the beginning of this year, there were 6 million cases of size 303 cans of peas, in contrast to 13 million the year before at that time.

Therefore, in recent months consumers have noticed that a can of peas for 69 cents is a bargain, when only a couple years ago, you might find four for a dollar. But what happens in the future, if you can't find peas for any price?

Farmers have been backed to the wall by years of high interest rates, heavy debt obligations, and collusion by the food cartel companies and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to allow "free trade" in fruits and vegetables, so that the cartel profits are high, but the price to the farmer is low.

U.S. imports of fruits and vegetables have been soaring since the early and mid-1980s, especially because of the free trade campaigns of Secretary of Agriculture Clayton Yeutter. Imports of canned vegetables have gone up from 240,000 pounds in 1981 to 490,000 pounds in 1988. Imports of frozen vegetables have gone up from 90,000 pounds in 1981 to over 300,000 pounds in 1988. Imports of fresh vegetables have climbed from 2 million pounds in 1981 to 3.5 million pounds annually by 1987 and 1988. The value of food imports exceeded exports in much of 1987.

Much of the produce comes from Mexico, where nutrition has collapsed to a crisis level. The deal was struck in 1982 by the International Monetary Fund and food cartel circles to bully Mexico into drastic exports of everything, to make its foreign currency debt payments to the banks.