

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Drought could be the last straw

Added to the unprecedented acreage cuts, the drought hitting many farm states equals a crop emergency looming this year.

The drought that has parched much of the U.S. south, plus the huge 1986 food acreage cutbacks and cropland retirement programs this year, add up to a foreseeable emergency food situation that needs action now. Farmers are already laboring under an impossible burden of debt and income short-fall, and they cannot withstand the added pressure of bad weather. Yet, Washington policymakers are ignoring the food supply consequences so clearly ahead, and instead, fixating on international food trade warfare.

The climatic problem is the high pressure system that has been sitting over the southeastern part of the North American continent, and blocking out moisture from the Gulf of Mexico that usually circulates in late winter and spring. For some regions, this continues many previous months of subnormal precipitation.

The National Weather Service (Department of Commerce) in Atlanta, reports that less than eight inches of rain has fallen there since January—12 inches below normal. The first four months of this year were the driest ever recorded. In the multi-state Tennessee Valley Authority area, a 23-month dry spell has transformed the Tennessee River into a "pea green" flow of algae-filled, low water.

The dry region extends all the way into Virginia, where 97% of the soils have a reduced moisture level. Hardest hit are the southeastern, and south-central states. The USDA list of the farm states most affected includes: 1) the southeast—Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, eastern Kentucky and Tennessee, and parts of Virginia and West

Virginia; and 2) the south-central states—west Texas, the Oklahoma panhandle, western Kansas, and eastern Colorado.

Farmers have held up planting in the parched southeastern region, until the point that almost guarantees a crop failure.

The general endangerment to all crops caused by the early-in-the-year bad weather is shown clearly in the national picture for wheat (three-fourths of which is winter wheat, planted in the fall).

The USDA crop projections—known to commonly overstate crop estimates, in deference to the food cartel interest in justifying low payments to farmers—already have been revised downward for the 1986 season. The national projection is that the U.S. wheat crop will drop this year to 59.3 million tons, 10% below last year's 66.0 million tons, and 16% below 1984's 70.6 million tons. Corn is expected to be down by 14% from last year, to 235.3 million tons. And these are only early estimates.

The drought has destroyed half of Alabama's \$50 million wheat crop, and the same percentage of South Carolina's. Alabama Gov. George Wallace has called for federal disaster emergency assistance. Because of the ever-present possibility of bad weather, government food and farm policy should always serve the national interest in buffering farmers financially, when needed, and in maintaining a national livestock inventory and crop base large enough to guarantee food security and "bounce-back."

The latest four-year farm law, the Food Security Act of 1985, does just

the opposite. The measures it imposes on U.S. farmers marginalize an already failing farm sector, and thus drastically worsen the impact of the current bad weather. The farm law mandates significantly lower price supports—but offers financial inducements to a desperate farmer for contracting to remove large amounts of crop land into the set-aside programs. Then there is the unprecedented "Conservation Reserve," that induces farmers to retire cropland from food production for 10 years—in fact, permanently.

This year, U.S. farmers have contracted with the government to take 43.9 million acres out of grain and cotton production. This is quite a bit more than last year's set-aside of 34 million acres. In the "Conservation Reserve" plan, 5 million acres are targeted to be taken out of production this year, of which, so far, about 889,000 acres have been contracted for retirement from food production.

The following are the USDA's conservative estimates of wheat crop reductions in top wheat states (based on May 1 conditions):

Kansas down to 330 million bushels, from last year's 433 million.

Colorado down to 110.2 million bushels from last year's 134.55 million.

Texas down to 119.6 million bushels from 1985's 187.2 million.

Oklahoma down to 145 million bushels from last year's 165 million.

In 1983, under the USDA's PIK—Payment-in-Kind—program, there was an unprecedented land set-aside of close to 75 million acres of grain and cotton. A severe drought hit the farmbelt in mid-summer, and parched the corn, soybeans, fodder, and other crops. The corn harvest was reduced by 50%. And the soybean crop was cut by almost a similar amount. That should have taught a lesson.