

'Drought of '88' threatens food, energy shortages

by Marcia Merry

Barring "miracle" rainfall, the early summer drought hitting North America, from the Caribbean coasts through Mexico to Canada, will devastate the U.S. economy. The immediate impact is seen in withered crops, livestock slaughters, waterway shutdowns, and electricity outages. Even worse than the "Drought of '83," when the combination of mid-summer drought and the Payment-in-Kind (PIK) program cut the U.S. corn harvest by 50%, the "Drought of '88" threatens massive staple shortfalls, soaring food prices, and unprecedented deprivation and starvation for populations in need worldwide.

Bold emergency measures, comparable to the functioning of the World War II War Mobilization Board, could restore production and distribution potential to what is required. But we do not have a government likely to do that. The June "emergency" meetings about the drought and agriculture in Washington, D.C. and Chicago, the congressional tours, and so forth, featured talk, not action. Agriculture Secretary Richard "Ding-a" Lyng, told Congress to "pray for rain" at Senate hearings on the crisis June 14. As late as June 23, Lyng told President Reagan, "It is too early for emergency action . . . rainfall in the next two weeks would alleviate much of the potential damage."

Although some may like to think of drought as an "act of nature," drought cycles—involving huge energy shifts, such as the pressure patterns associated with the El Nino current in the Pacific Ocean, or the Gulf Stream in the Atlantic, can be anticipated. However, federal policies of the last 20 years, and especially the last five years, have guaranteed the devastation now confronting the nation.

First, federal policies have deliberately cut both food production and food output potential itself, through massive acreage reductions, meat and milk herd reductions, and dis-possession and capital depletion of farms. Acreage reduction

in the tens of millions, by reducing the respiration between atmosphere and vegetation, itself fosters drought. Second, federal policies have drawn down food reserve stocks through discount grain sales to the Soviet Union, and other deals preferential to the political and financial demands of the food cartel companies (Cargill, Bunge, Continental, Dreyfus, Archer Daniels Midland/Toepfer, André/Garnac, etc.) Finally, federal policy has opposed the required development of infrastructure projects, in particular, an expanded nuclear power grid, and large-scale water provision and management systems.

The precipitation shortages and searing temperatures have hit all the major "breadbasket" regions early in the growing season. In the Northern Plains states, at least half the wheat, barley, and oats crops have been lost as of the third week in June, and more losses will come without rain. These losses, from Minnesota through the Dakotas and Montana, represent at least 22% of the projected U.S. national grain harvest. Only 30% or less of spring wheat was even planted in the Canadian prairies this year, and Ottawa officials have placed an emergency hold on grain export shipments.

The entire cornbelt, from Western Pennsylvania to Nebraska, is hit by drought. As of mid-June, a 7-inch rain deficit retarded plant growth; then, the heat dehydrated the stunted stalks.

In all parts of the drought area, cattle herds are being liquidated. Despite the vastly reduced national cattle herd, prices for feeder cattle have temporarily dropped, reflecting the large number for sale, and the high cost of feed. In northern Mexico, thousands of head of cattle are dying. Those being sent across the border to the Texas Panhandle, where a million head have come annually in recent years, are barely able to walk.

At the same time, power levels and water transport are being cut by the drought. On June 21, the Mississippi River at Memphis, Tennessee sank to an all-time low. As of mid-June, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was intermittently closing parts of the river's shipping channel for dredging or emergency aid to grounded barges. Normally 300 feet wide, the channel has narrowed to 175 feet in some places. South of Cairo, Illinois, the channel is so shallow that 23 tow vessels pulling 460 barges have ran aground in just six days.

Impact on water transport

The entire waterway system of the heartland of the continent is affected—the huge Tennessee, Ohio, Missouri, Red River, and Mississippi networks. Tennessee Valley Authority records show that the drought is the worst this century in their multi-state region.

On June 21, the first power plant had to be shut down because of the drought, the Arkansas Power Company's 544-megawatt Ritchie generating plant in Helena. The plant could not get the 170,000 gallons a minute required to cool the steam from its turbines. The plant's water intake pipe, normally 20 feet below the water surface, was hanging in the air. Other plants are threatened with shutdown because of depletion of their coal stocks. Barges cannot navigate the shallow waters to keep stocks up. The TVA plans to close its 944-megawatt Allen plant in Tennessee if the river level drops another 8 inches. The Allen coal pile is down to 25 days' worth of stocks for generating electricity.

What the media headlines fail to report, when covering these hour-by-hour breakdowns, is that these are needless disasters.

The food situation

First, the basic question of food.

Close to 90 million acres of cropland was not planted in the United States this season as a result of federal crop reduction policies. Because of the large annual set-aside requirement for this season's government commodity programs, about 30% of base corn and wheat acreage was not planted—the largest set-aside this decade. This amounts to idling at least 50 million acres of base cropland. Second, since 1985, the USDA has implemented the unprecedented "Conservation Reserve Program," in which, so far, 22 million acres have been set aside for at least 10 years for non-food cover crop purposes, in the name of conservation of soils. In fact, the USDA policy has been at the service of food cartel companies, whose policy is to create profits and political control through "scarcity." We will now see the results.

Finally, millions of acres have not been planted because farm operations have been shut down under the Reagan-Bush "Recovery."

Then, there is government lying. The USDA has overstated the quantities of food stocks in storage to lull the public into complacency over food supplies, and to rationalize the

low prices paid to farmers by food cartel companies. Meanwhile, the Agriculture Department, with congressional blessing, has implemented the outrageous "Export Enhancement Program" to ship millions of tons of grain to the Soviet Union at sweetheart prices. Direct federal subsidies of grainstocks were given to the cartel trading companies, to provide them guaranteed profits, while U.S. farmers continued to receive low prices. In the last year, for example, more U.S. soybeans were committed to the Soviet Union than total shipments since 1979. Now, since the drought-ridden United States produces 70% of all the world's soybeans, the prime animal feed and all-purpose vegetable oil and meal crop, world soybean stocks will drop to bare minimum, or even below "pipeline" requirements of 100 million bushels. Price levels have risen for U.S. soybean exports to Western Europe from \$214 per ton in June 1987, to \$340 per ton this year. Prices can easily go to \$500 or higher.

Huge volumes of wheat have been flowing from the United States to Russia while the USDA knowingly drove U.S. wheat reserves and acreage down. The biggest reduction in U.S. wheat stocks on record took place from May 1987 to May 1988, falling from 1.8 to 1.2 billion bushels.

In addition to these criminal decisions about trade, acreage and food reserves, federal policy has undercut the very ability of the U.S. economy to produce, process, and ship food. Over 20 years ago, engineers and policymakers devised the plans and technologies to divert to the south water now flowing north to the Arctic Ocean, from the MacKenzie and Yukon Rivers in Canada. This engineering project, a giant form of the Tennessee Valley development plan, or the 19th-century Ohio-Missouri-Mississippi development plan, would have provided millions of acre-feet of water to the Canadian prairies and U.S. Plains States, and also replenished the Great Lakes and various river systems.

Cries of alarm

Now, as the crisis is becoming obvious, isolated cries of alarm are sounded. The *New York Times*, a foe of electricity even in the 1890s, called for reconsideration of nuclear power development—ostensibly to halt the "Greenhouse Effect" warming trend. Illinois Gov. Richard Thompson on June 23, called for diverting water from Lake Michigan to raise levels in the Mississippi system. Senators are calling for reopening the 22 million acres of the Conservation Reserve Program for grazing to save herds.

However, immediately, a national grain and foodstocks audit must be completed to allow the careful reallocation of food supplies, including the use of grainstocks for milling for cereals and livestock feeds—and not, for example, for ethanol or soft drink sweeteners. A stay must be put on exports to the Soviet Union and elsewhere, except for specified areas of need, determined under the national reserve food-use plan. Sweeping measures to restore and expand U.S. food output are required.