

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

The groundwater pollution scare

Farmers are being blamed for a problem that is easily solved, in yet another move to undermine the family farm.

On both sides of the Atlantic, there is a mobilization by government agricultural and environmental agencies to target farmers as culprits in the alleged crime of polluting groundwater. Dozens of restrictions and pilot programs are in motion to implement this outlook, which is inhibiting farming to the extent of threatening the future basis of plentiful, wholesome food.

The issue involved is not, as stated, the matter of a threat to groundwater from farming—except in a few isolated cases. In densely populated parts of Europe and the United States—for example, the Low Countries of northern Europe, or the densely populated counties of the Conestoga River shed in southeastern Pennsylvania—sweet water supplies could be easily maintained through the right civil engineering projects—water treatment, sewage plants, etc. Special arrangements would need to be made for the limited number of farms and rural residences dependent on well water, but individual wells and septic fields would not be the common mode of water management.

Instead of this approach, bureaucrats are using the issue of protecting groundwater supplies—wells and running water—to place severe restrictions on farming. These restrictions range from specifying how many head of livestock may be kept per acre to prevent generation of excessive excrement, to how little—if any—fertilizer may be applied, and when, to prevent run-off into the groundwater.

On May 10, British Environmen-

tal Secretary Nicholas Ridley told a meeting of the Agriculture Forum in London that it was “extremely disappointing” to see that cases of pollution caused by agriculture had risen by 6% during the past year. He said, “The overall position has reached an unacceptable level. The time has come not only for this trend to be stopped, but to put it firmly into reverse.”

Ridley warned that through the process of privatization now under way in Britain, a National Rivers Authority would be established, and it would be empowered to take harsh action against farmers wherever necessary.

The same week, the British Ministry of Agriculture announced a proposal for curbs on the use of nitrogen fertilizers in pilot areas.

The European Community Agriculture Commission in Brussels has designated almost one-third of the crop areas of Europe as “water protection target zones,” where farming is eventually to be so regulated as to cease to exist, as it is now known.

In the United States, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency have teamed up on similar plans. The immediate line of attack is in the state legislatures, in coordination with the USDA.

In Minnesota this spring, protecting groundwater is the number one legislative issue. Two bills have been introduced that contain measures ranging from research and public education, to monitoring supplies, restrictive laws on new wells, and tight-

ened control over the use of pesticides and fertilizers.

In Nebraska, a groundwater map is expected to be released and circulated in June, which will show new areas of nitrate contamination, and also areas of concentration prior to 1984. The agency in charge, from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is expecting that the map will show the presence of heavier concentrations of nitrogen and a broadening pattern of contamination.

By the end of the year, the USDA and the EPA plan to put out a national map of these patterns, in order to use it as the basis for imposing heavy restrictions on agricultural practices. They do not plan to call for water development projects. The Conservation Foundation/World Wildlife Fund, which EPA head William Reilly headed before coming to EPA, has charged in recent years that new water projects—dams, sewage systems, water purification facilities—were simply “boondoggles” for civil engineers. The Conservation Foundation and similar agencies are behind the scare over nitrates in groundwater. The outlook of these agencies is that the world has too many people, and does not need more farmers, food, or population.

These zero-growth Eastern Establishment conservation agencies are heavily funding state and local “water protection” rackets to be used against farm and residential population expansion. In Nebraska, for example, an entity called the Environmental Coordinating Council has been formed to gain support for water and waste issues.

Among the backers are the Nebraska Wildlife Federation, the Nebraska chapter of the Sierra Club, the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, and the Center for Rural Affairs, which itself is an Eastern Establishment arm in the farm belt.