

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Poor weather, insects threaten corn

The USDA is still saying it's "premature" to take measures, but soon, it may be too late.

A survey of the status of the 1989 corn crop shows that many parts of the corn belt are severely hit by poor weather, insects, and the potential for more trouble further along in the growing season.

Since the U.S. winter wheat crop—soon to be harvested—is estimated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to be down by 10% from last year, making it the smallest crop since 1978, federal and local emergency measures should already be in effect to minimize other crop and livestock losses over this summer in the interests of the national security of the food supply.

Instead, Agriculture Secretary Clayton Yeutter has come to repeat his view like a parrot: It is "premature" to worry. This is the same view he stated in March, when Kansas wheat growers forewarned of the vast damage to the winter wheat crop there and in adjacent states. Yeutter still has refused to go along with congressional farm state efforts to extend the provisions of the 1988 Drought Relief Act to cover winter wheat growers, who were excluded from coverage because of the timing of their crop. "Winter" wheat is planted in the fall, and harvested in early summer.

Yeutter also said recently that it is "premature" to enact legislation to aid corn and soybean farmers (who plant in the spring, and harvest in the fall) this year. He contends that with the growing season just beginning, Congress must wait and see if help is really needed.

Among those in opposition is Iowa Sen. Charles Grassley (R), who wants

Congress to adopt standby legislation, saying that if crops flourish, the relief measures need not be applied. Grassley has never exerted leadership for the kind of national farm policies needed to resolve the overall food crisis (parity farm prices, a stay on farm foreclosures, dismantling the food cartel companies that dominate the food supply chain, etc.), but even Grassley can see that crops are threatened. He told reporters on a phone briefing in early June, "I guess I'm a boy scout. I believe in being prepared."

Grassley blames Yeutter for being overly optimistic to assume that Congress could draft a relief bill on the spot in case of emergency. This summer Congress plans to recess the last week of June through the first week of July, and also from Aug. 5 through Labor Day.

As of mid-June, the reports from the farmbelt are already dire. In Iowa—the heart of the corn belt—subsoil moisture in the south central part of the state has never been replenished since last year's drought. Therefore, the newly planted crop—which germinated in the topsoil moisture—requires a continuous sequence of "perfect" rains to do well over the summer. Pastures have withered and ponds have dried up. Many towns are relying on temporary water tanks. Hundreds of farmers have had to sell off their beef cattle, and give up their farrow-to-finish hog operations because they cannot afford to haul water for their animals.

In southwestern Minnesota, the northern borderland of the corn belt,

20 counties are very water short. Corn plants are showing signs of stress. The June 15 Minnesota edition of "agri-news" reported, "fears are increasing that this growing season will be a rerun of last year." Fred Benson, an agricultural extension official said, "Moisture has been pretty spotty. We're basically hand-to-mouth. We have adequate topsoil moisture but it will go pretty fast if we get some hot weather and winds."

This same area is also plagued by a grasshopper invasion. The back-to-back droughts of 1988-89 have allowed nearly 100% hatching of the spring hopper eggs. The young insect nymphs are feeding on grasses, and field edges—especially on the borders of the Conservation Reserve Program set-aside lands, where the USDA says no food crops may be grown. But over the summer, the bugs will shift into the corn. "That's when the big one will hit us. The row crops [corn and soybeans] will catch the dickens," according to Dave Noetzel, a University of Minnesota entomologist who calls the hopper infestation the worst in his experience of 30 years. Noetzel has written to Sen. Rudy Boschwitz (R-Minn.) asking that 2 million acres be sprayed with pesticides.

In Ohio and western Pennsylvania—the eastern boundary of the North American corn belt, the weather has been so wet this spring that farmers could not get the corn crop planted on time. Near Erie, for example, only 25-50% of the corn has been planted—which should be all in the ground by now. Some farmers had to substitute short-season corn for their preferred corn variety, in hopes of getting any crop, even if it is low in yield. Many farmers will get no proper ears at all, but will green chop the corn for silage—if they happen to be the type of operation that has the livestock to utilize the corn.