

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Set-aside wrecks the real ecology

Conservation Reserve and set-aside cropland fosters insects and brushfires—and deprives millions of food.

According to the most recent figures of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 30.9 million acres were set aside from growing food and feed crops last year, in the annual acreage reduction program run by the USDA. This idled acreage represents millions of tons of lost corn, wheat, oats, barley, and sorghum, that could now be in the food chain.

In addition to the 30.9 million annual set-aside acres, another 40 million acres are in non-food use in the Conservation Reserve Program—a plan started in 1985 to take cropland out of food use for 10 years, under the rationalization that this will preserve soils and help the environment. The CRP plan offers farmers a financial inducement to receive a federal payment, and save crop production costs, by contracting not to grow food.

Therefore, in 1989, there was a total of almost 71 million acres out of food or feed production. At a rough factor of five persons per acre, this represents food lost for 355 million people for a year—more than the population of the United States, Canada, and Mexico combined. The 71 million acres represents about 13% of the total average crop acreage base in the nation.

The transfer of large tracts of U.S. cropland out of food production, combined with the decline in food output in other nations, especially the few food-exporting countries, has led to a calamitous world food shortage.

The level of grain in reserve stocks internationally is less than 50 days' worth of average use—a level itself already far below nutritional needs. Grain stocks have declined for the last

four years in a row, from over 400 million tons, down to only 200 million tons.

To provide just a minimum diet to all the world's 5 billion people, at least 2 billion tons of grain should be grown annually. The proper diet would require 3 billion tons—providing grain for direct cereals consumption, and also grain for indirect consumption through the feed supply for livestock.

For the last four years in a row, less than 1.8 billion tons of grain have been produced—below the annual average grain consumption. Therefore, a record drawdown of grain stocks has occurred.

In the face of this catastrophe, "common sense" should dictate that governments would take emergency measures to rev up basic food production. Instead, in Washington, there is talk of expanding the Conservation Reserve Program even more to take more land out of food cultivation. Some are proposing this for the new 1990 farm bill.

Agriculture Secretary Clayton Yeutter announced a reduction in the amount of land farmers are asked to idle in the annual acreage set-aside program for this year, but nevertheless, there still will be almost 30 million acres not planted in the 1990 crop season. And Yeutter has refused to even consider an emergency mobilization for expanding plantings to provide more food.

Under the conditions of world food crisis, set-aside is genocide.

Already, the lack of grain is manifest in the obliteration of whole nations in Africa. The U.N. has sent out repeated alarms about the immediate

crisis in Angola, Ethiopia, and Mozambique.

Even in its own terms of "protecting the environment" (apart from mankind), taking land out of food cultivation and converting it into wilderness is incompetent and immoral. Among other problems, brushfires and insect plagues are abetted by having land in the Conservation Reserve Program.

Earlier this year, in the dry parts of Texas, brushfires were a major problem. The field consultant for the State Firemen's and Fire Marshals' Association of Texas, Alan Fondy, said in April that the untouched CRP fields and their tall, lush grasses become a fire danger during the Texas dry periods. "It's creating a monster for volunteer firefighters," he said.

The lush growth helps grass fires start more often, spread faster, and burn hotter. They require more equipment and manpower to fight. Fondy reported, "We've lost firefighters in this stuff, and we've lost equipment in this stuff."

In the Texas Panhandle there are about 1 million acres in the CRP 10 year plan.

In the Northern Plains states, the CRP lands have harbored the carry-over of grasshoppers, locusts, and other crop pests. The untouched vegetation, under the weather conditions favorable to the insects wintering cycle, have produced thousands of perfect "staging grounds" where the pests gather, and then move out into the fields with crops.

The governors of the Dakotas and Minnesota have already asked for federal assistance to conduct needed spraying programs. But farmers trying to produce good crops are faced with the impossibility of protecting their own fields against the threat from the adjacent CRP lands.