

## Agriculture by Sue Atkinson

### Relief programs run out of food

*The U.S. Department of Agriculture is axing food donations, while Washington covers up the crisis.*

**T**his June marks not only the occasion of the annual wheat harvest in the United States, but the occurrence of food shortages in what was once considered the land of plenty.

Early in June, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that its stocks of food used for "bonus" donations (foodstuffs over and above contracted commodities) were running out. Bonus food donations by the USDA have dropped by more than 75% since FY 1987, while the number of needy served has increased. At the time of the just-announced cuts, these bonus foods were supplying 7 million Americans with supplemental food.

The program immediately hit hard is the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program, a USDA program which provides food to charities. In early June, the USDA discontinued all TEFAP distribution from its Atlanta, Georgia warehouse, to 250,000 people in the state.

On July 1, the USDA discontinues supplying school lunch programs with bonus flour. Earlier this spring, the USDA cut flour donations to other recipient programs for mothers and infants, the elderly, orphanages, hospitals, Indian reservations, prisons, and other institutions.

The impact is devastating, but the Bush-Clinton-Perot trio has not even acknowledged the crisis, and Congress has only conducted rump-covering hearings.

State and local food relief officials, however, give a picture of a nationwide food emergency. For example, food banks in northwestern Ohio

have not received cheese or powdered milk for four years, as unemployment and the need for food have worsened. Rice and beans have been absent from the food banks for a year.

At one time, every family was guaranteed a basic amount of food. This is no longer the case. Food bank workers say, "If they gave us three times as much food, it wouldn't be enough" to feed all the hungry people in the area. Families are selling their food stamps to meet shelter costs. The food stamps for a family don't generally last more than two or three weeks out of the month, after which the recipients must turn to the food banks.

Indian reservations report that the cuts will be devastating because their residents can no longer afford to buy bread and have relied on the bonus program to make their own.

Nationally, the school lunch program will lose \$30 million worth of flour. School officials estimate that for every 1% increase in the price of a meal, there is a 1% decrease in participation in the program, so there will be a bigger lineup at food banks and soup kitchens.

However, recently, the needy have been turned away empty-handed from food bank distribution centers in Arizona, Maryland, and West Virginia.

These turn-away situations were reported at a June 18 hearing in Washington, D.C., conducted by Rep. Bob Wise (D-W. Va.), who is chairman of the Government Operations Subcommittee on Information, Justice, and Agriculture. On June 24, House Agri-

culture Committee Chairman Rep. Kika de la Garza (D-Tex.) also held a hearing on the food donations shortages.

However, so far, no one in Congress has stepped forward to call for emergency farm output measures, and emergency food distribution measures to prevent Americans from going hungry.

Wise instead attacks foreign aid. He said in his press release on the June 18 hearing, "I am not convinced that the taxpayer prefers to use public money for the benefit of foreign consumers when millions of people are in need of food in the U.S."

De la Garza merely called on the administration "to explain the criteria used in allocating commodities for donation and its forecast on the availability of supplies." In his advance press release, De la Garza opined: "Market-oriented changes [free trade] in farm policies were made in the 1985 and 1990 farm bills to reduce costly, burdensome government stocks. Now we face the irony that the success of these policies is posing problems for an array of feeding programs that have become dependent on these donations."

The U.S. wheat harvest dramatizes the national and world food crisis. Whatever the final harvest volume turns out to be for this crop year, wheat carryover stocks are forecast to be the lowest since 1975-76.

Worldwide, the grains situation is the same. The April report of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization stated that "world carryover stocks are being drawn down. The current FAO forecast puts global cereal stocks at the end of 1991-92 seasons at some 9% below their opening level. Most of the decline will be among developed countries, with cereal stocks in the United States falling to their lowest level since the early 1970s."