

## Agriculture by Marcia Merry

### Post-flood crop losses mount

*Fungus, soggy soils, and cool temperatures rob the world food chain in the wake of July floods.*

In a feature survey in the Aug. 20 issue, we showed that the losses of the U.S. corn crop already sustained as of Aug. 1, because of the nine-state corn belt floods, would yield a national corn harvest of 7.4 billion bushels — on condition that everything went right from Aug. 1 to harvest. And because this would not happen, the expected corn harvest instead would sink by millions of bushels more each week. What can be expected are losses on the scale of the drought disaster years of 1988, when corn output fell to 4.93 billion bushels from 7.131 the year before; and 1983, when corn output fell to 4.166 billion bushels, from 8.235 billion in 1982.

Moreover, the loss of harvest potential in 1983 applies to soybeans, wheat, barley and every other crop in the region.

Yet the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Aug. 11 crop survey forecast a corn crop of 7.4 billion bushels, including all the projected contingencies between now and harvest time. Events are showing that the USDA is dead wrong; and this means crisis for the food chain.

In Indiana — part of the eastern cornbelt that was not hit by the Missouri-Mississippi basins July flooding — torrential rains fell in August, causing flash floods on Aug. 17. Thousands of acres of corn were hit.

In Iowa, the corn crop that was not hit outright by floods or ponding is now showing the ill effects of waterlogged soils. The ears are not filling out, and what kernels are there, will be small. This results from the inability of the corn plants to take up nitro-

gen. Though the farmer may have applied nitrogen fertilizer, the plants cannot get access to it because some of the nitrogen has volatilized, or otherwise become tied up as nitrates.

For example, in what are considered the best fields in Keokuk County, southeastern Iowa, the crop looks excellent "from the road," but when you examine the ears and kernels, it is evident that the yields will be very low. Early frosts are likely, which will drastically reduce the crop.

The spring wheat and barley picture is equally grim. In the Red River Valley area of Minnesota, and the Dakotas — the center of these crops — a fungus is widespread, causing "vomitoxin" that can make the grain unfit for consumption. Another problem is a scab which turns the grain pink, and makes it lightweight. Levels in wheat shouldn't exceed 2 parts per million if it is to be milled for human consumption, or 4 ppm if for animal feed. But vomitoxin levels ranged from 4-25 ppm in grain submitted for testing in mid-August.

In mid-July, 61% of the crop was rated good to excellent in Minnesota. In mid-August, that rating fell to 18%. The Aug. 11 crop report estimated that Minnesota's spring wheat crop lost 10% of its harvest potential in July. The potential is still falling. The price jumped a measly 12.5¢ at the grain exchange Aug. 17.

Despite this picture of continuing damage, prices for corn have gone down to \$2.15 a bushel; and for soybeans, have dropped from \$7.50 down to \$6.85 a bushel. These low prices, in turn, are about half of what

is a parity price — a fair price to the farmer, to enable him to capitalize future crops.

Rather than publicize the national and international emergency this crop disaster portends, the media and federal officials have been minimizing the consequences. National television publicizes Hollywood stooge Willie Nelson, playing a "friend of the farmer" role, holding benefit concerts to raise pennies for flood-stricken farmers.

The U.S. losses of harvest potential already confirmed as of Aug. 1, add up to a strategic blow to the world food supply. An estimated 15 million metric tons of U.S. corn are knocked out for certain. This represents fully 30% of the 48-50 million tons of corn that the U.S. has been exporting each year in recent years. Look at the destination of U.S. corn exports in light of the rate of loss of U.S. harvest potential:

- Japan. In recent years, Japan has imported fully 13 million metric tons (mt) of corn each year on its own.

- Former Soviet Union. Typical annual corn exports to the Soviet Union in the late 1980s stood at 13 million mt. Now those countries have no means to pay, but the need for the grains is even greater.

- Mexico. This country has been ordered by the financial backers of "free trade" to abandon its own corn output, and rely on the United States. From 1985 to 1990, the percent of U.S. annual corn exports going to Mexico rose from 5% to 10%, reaching 4.611 million mt in 1989.

- Western Europe. Typically over 2.8 million mt of U.S. corn have been exported to the European Community each year.

In the U.S. domestic food chain, corn shows up everywhere from meats and poultry, to oils and dressings, to corn sweeteners.