

185

WASHINGTON MEMO

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THE FARM SCENE IN WASHINGTON

As a member of the Senate Agriculture Committee and former member of the House Committee, my approach to farm problems is -- and has been -- rooted in permitting the farmer to manage his own business and to enjoy a fair return on his investment while also assuring the consumer the highest quality food at low cost.

Unfortunately, only the last part of that equation is being met. The consumer is getting quality at bargain prices. About 17% of the disposable dollar is being spent on food in the U.S., the lowest percentage enjoyed by any country.

On the other hand, the American farmer -- the most efficient and effective in the world -- does not receive a proportionate return for his investment and overall contribution to the economy. Farm income lags 25% behind non-farm income. And almost 50% of the farmers' income last year was derived from off-the-farm employment -- a source many men and women resorted to in order to make ends meet.

Not living in a dream world, I cannot forecast instant prosperity for America's farmers. I can report, however, there are some encouraging signs in Washington that Congress, the Department of Agriculture and the Administration are striving to reverse the course of agriculture and to transform rural communities into regions of greater opportunity and hope.

- Congressional Awareness -

First, despite the overriding concern over the Vietnam war and pressing urban needs, there seems to be an improved awareness in Congress that sound farm programs and policies are basic to solving many of our Nation's problems -- a stable economy, migration to the cities, and effective foreign policy and trade, to name a few. This development is encouraging in view of the fact that only 83 of 435 Congressional Districts have as much as 15% of their populations on farms. It takes on added significance since basic farm legislation expires Dec. 31, 1970, and new legislation will have to be approved by both the House and Senate.

- USDA Approach And Aims -

Second, Agriculture Secretary Clifford Hardin and his staff have taken an unusual common-sense and positive approach to finding workable solutions to the farm dilemma. Fully realizing that to date, satisfactory solutions have eluded some very fine minds in this Nation, they have sought to build on the successes of the past and to modify or consider alternatives to legislation which has decidedly failed the farmer. I am confident all of us will begin to see the specific shape and direction of a farm policy within the next several months and that it will embrace two primary objectives: increasing producer income and enabling U.S. farm products to compete more effectively in export markets.

Just last week, Secretary Hardin outlined two possible alternatives for wheat, feed grains and cotton. Under one option -- a "set aside" program, farmers accepting allotments would receive supplement payments on the normal production if they leave part of their land idle. The remaining land could be planted any way the farmers wished, including seeding with the crop affected by the allotment. The other option involves allotments and supplemental payments, with acreage diversion achieved through additional payments. Diversion would not be required. Under both options, crop loans would be allowed.

- The President & Rural Revitalization -

Third, President Nixon has undertaken a bold attack on rural problems related to low income and to upgrading the quality of life and opportunity in rural areas. Through the President's proposed family assistance program for those who, though employed, have inadequate incomes and through efforts to revitalize the rural development program, a solid beginning is being made to extend meaningful opportunity and advancement to millions of Americans living in farm areas.