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FARM FORUM

by United States Senator Bob Dole

This Congress I have joined a newly-formed subcommittee that is of special interest to rural Kansans, but offers many benefits to urbanites.

The subcommittee, Rural Development, is under the Senate Agriculture and Forestry Committee. My work here will be directed toward arresting the rural to urban population shift, a trend that disrupts both the individuals involved and the local and national economies. This can be accomplished only if rural living standards, communities and incomes are made commensurate with those of other segments of the economy. A better deal for country dwellers will bring about more than economic benefits. A stabilized rural population could serve to lessen some of the urban problems that compound daily due to crowd conditions in our cities.

Halting the rural outmigration is a tall order, and unfortunately, one that previous Administrations have ignored. President Nixon, however, recognizes the urgency for rural development legislation, as do several members of Congress who are committed to insuring enactment this Session.

The goal for such measures will be to provide the initial boost to rural Americans so that soon they will be able to help themselves. Presently, there is real need for better housing, better health facilities and improved fire and police protection.

Rural development would not pay for all of these programs, but would work to develop suitable incentives for rural living by coordinating the planning for proper facilities and services. Through careful evaluation of priorities, it could provide some grants, some low interest loans and incentives for public financing (similar to the way the Farmers Home Administration functions.)

The needs of rural America are readily apparent, but I will review them here briefly.

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In the past 10 years, the United States lost one half of its farm population, and at a time when the rest of the nation enjoyed a rapid overall growth. Poor living conditions and inadequate community services were a partial cause for the mass exodus. Of the 5.8 million substandard homes in America, 3.6 million are located in rural areas. Lower incomes is also a contributing factor.

Traditionally, farmers have been at the mercy of available markets. This dependence has restrained farm income growth. The total net income from farming has gained steadily, but at a lesser rate than other occupations. With the larger farm size, production per farm and the net income have increased but to fewer farmers. Marginal farmers were quick to learn they could move to the city and earn far more money for much less effort. In recent years, farmers have begun to think in terms of orderly marketing their production. But this movement, still in its early stages, came too late to help the farmers who have already left.

Up to this point, efforts to aid rural development have been fragmented and diffused into several different agencies in federal and local governments. Many of these programs have merit, but without coordination, money and energy is often wasted. I will discuss at a later date the status of programs now available, and their need for consolidation.

My work in rural development thus far has been devoted to laying groundwork for carefully conceived but expedient legislation.

My purpose and that of the Administration is summarized in the following:

- (1) To improve the rural environment for those persons presently living in it, and to preserve for others its healthy atmosphere, which is peculiar to rural America.
- (2) To assist in the planning and development of rural communities so as to attract future population growth, using the concept of "keeping them on the farm" rather than attracting urban dwellers "back to the farm."

Rural development is a practical approach to meeting the needs of our countryside. By proposing incentives to Americans for continued rural living, it offers a much more permanent solution to the problem of rural outmigration than do government subsidy programs. Progress in the long-neglected area is now underway.

Secretary of Agriculture Clifford M. Hardin has gained industry's assurance, that provided with an adequate rural labor force, it will readily locate plants in small communities. These selected plants would not harm the area's environment and would encourage development of community services and recreational facilities. This in turn would generate additional population growth.

Such planning and direction can develop rural America in a sensible manner, with benefit to small communities, and great promise for the entire nation.

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