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NEWS from U.S. Senator Bob Dole

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PREPARED TEXT OF SPEECH BY SEN. BOB DOLE
CONFERENCE ON "NUTRITION AND THE AMERICAN FOOD SYSTEM: A NEW FOCUS"
L'ENFANT PLAZA HOTEL, WASHINGTON D.C.

It is fitting that this conference on nutrition and the American food system should be occurring just as a conference committee of the two houses of Congress prepare to reconcile differences in the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 as passed separately by the Senate and House.

This, as you know, is nearing the final step in the legislative process before a completed bill is sent to the President for his signature. Representatives of both bodies sit on the conference committee. Their responsibility is to agree on common provisions that will be acceptable to both the House and Senate.

As the senior Republican conferee, I am confident that the conference report will be approved by both houses before the August recess, which begins at the end of next week, and that the legislation will then be signed into law by the President.

The Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 is easily the most important food legislation to come out of the 95th Congress. There is, I believe, great symbolic significance in the joining together of farm commodity programs and food stamp reforms in a single legislative package. There is a new awareness in our country of the many intricate relationships between nutrition and the food system--affecting consumers, producers, government policy makers, and a great many others in and out of the food industry.

There are several reasons for this new concern with the food that we eat. Widespread hunger in the developing nations...nutritional deficiencies among some of our own people that were highlighted by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs...new export markets that opened up for American agriculture...controversies over the safety of food additives, the credibility of our food grading system, the integrity of the food inspection system...and the growth of the food stamp program and various food assistance programs for children and the elderly...all these have caused the American people to be conscious as never before of the connections between agriculture, government, the food industry, and good nutrition.

COORDINATED FOOD POLICY

The Community Nutrition Institute, the Food Marketing Institute, and Family Circle Magazine are to be commended for planning and sponsoring this valuable conference. A new focus is essential if we are to capitalize on the current popular interest in nutrition by arriving at an informed and coordinated national food policy that fairly and adequately serves the interests of all our people. As the theme of your conference correctly presumes, the coming together of many disparate elements will determine whether the American people have the best possible access to sound nutrition and good health.

The keynote that I would hope to sound here this morning is the need for greater understanding of the true nature of these relationships. Just as a farmer may have difficulty accepting the scientific evidence of unhealthy consequences in some of the foods that he has always made his living producing, so too do urban consumers of food sometimes find it hard to understand the economic realities of a farmer's life--and his bank account, if any--today.

NUTRITIONAL PLANNING COMMUNITY PROCESS

Nutritional planning should be a community process in the finest sense of that word--community. The policies that we adopt should disregard the well-being of none of our citizens, lest we be divided into rival camps, the producers, processors, and sellers of food on one side, the consumers on the other. A bountiful, stable supply of food is not only one of our great national assets--it also is the starting point for any discussion of wise national food and nutrition policy for talk of a responsible, progressive food policy is academic without a viable farm economy.

A farmer cannot operate unless he is able to sell what he grows for at least the equivalent of what it cost him to produce it. Yet many of our wheat and feed grain producers are caught in a vicious cost-price squeeze that will put them out of business if it is allowed to continue much longer. Inflation hits the farmer along with the city dweller. While their costs keep rising, the price of wheat, for example, has plunged from around \$4 a bushel to under \$2 a bushel--which is about \$1 below the average costs of production.

"BROUGHT \$2 A BUSHEL"--IN 1917

The Emporia Gazette of Emporia, Kansas carried this item in its "Sixty Years Ago" column on July 8: "The first wheat of the 1917 crop has been sold to the Soden's mill by Ed Collins of the Fowler neighborhood," the item said. "It brought \$2 a bushel." Sixty years later, Ed Collins' grandchildren, if they are farming in Kansas, can't get \$2 for a bushel of wheat!

My friends, I do not have to dwell on the implications of that news item. None of you could possibly get by selling your skills at a lower per-unit price than your grandfather received 60 years ago. Good weather and large crop forecasts all over the world have resulted in lower export demand and sharply reduced farm prices. Although land values are up, this is small comfort to the farmer. It doesn't help him pay his bill or keep him from going deeper into debt. The commodity programs that are included in the farm bill are intended to provide basic minimum price and income assurances.

American agriculture is the most efficient, most productive on earth. The interlocking objectives of the farm bill are: First, to provide an abundant supply of nourishing food for all Americans at reasonable and stable prices; and second, to assure fair and stable prices for farmers, at least sufficient to meet their production costs. If farmers can't stay in business, and their land lies fallow, there will be less production, less food--and, of course, consumer prices will soar still higher. Then there will be shortages at home; high prices; nothing left for either exports abroad or food assistance programs for low-income individuals in this country. The support that the farm bills received from metropolitan representatives in both the Senate and the House--in spite of the ill-advised threat of a presidential veto--was a source of personal satisfaction. From whatever their districts, my colleagues responded to the desperate plight of the American farmer--and the unofficial indication is that President Carter will reconsider his blustering threats of a veto and capitulate.

NOT "SPECIAL INTEREST" MEASURE

With the incorporation of food stamp reform into the farm bill, many more non-agricultural groups have become interested in farm legislation. This, I believe, is desirable for it helps to get away from the misguided impression that the farm programs are "special interest" measures and somehow contrary to the public good. In fact, a sound farm economy with stable prices and high productivity is very much in the national interest. Farmers and consumers are interdependent. Government policies and the action of the marketplace will affect them both--sometimes in contrary ways.

I am convinced, there fore, that agriculture and nutrition must be brought into closer coordination. There has been a farm policy since the beginning of this country, but the institution of a national food policy has been late coming. But now, as more and more Americans are aware of the link between what they eat and how healthy they are, nutrition is likely to be the central consideration in all our food policies. As the food buying habits of the American people change, the production habits of the American farmer will change--a surely as night follows the day.

You are familiar with the enormous increase in the number and size of federal food programs. I am proud to have been an original co-sponsor with Senator McGovern of the provision contained in the farm bill to eliminate the cash purchase requirement for food stamps. This will make it easier for the people who need and deserve the price advantage of food stamps to make use of that help, while at the same time weeding out those who do not deserve assistance.

Another important bill that is about to go to conference between the Senate and the House is the child nutrition legislation with its \$27.7 million price tag for nutrition education and training. I support that bill enthusiastically, including the Bellmon amendment that would allow parents to benefit indirectly from the programs; and my own amendment that would restore the Commissioner of Education's jurisdiction over vending machine foods in schools.

CONSOLIDATE PROGRAMS

There is a danger in allowing the disjointed spread of more and more separate conceived food programs. There are now 15 different federal programs which provide subsidies for 49 different types of meals for needy children. Programs subsidize school breakfasts and lunches which include milk; and they also subsidize consumption of milk by itself as a separate program. Just before leaving office, President Ford proposed a sensible consolidation of those federal food programs to make their administration more efficient. We all want to make nutritious food available to as many needy children as we can. But program duplications and inconsistencies abound. More money is being spent on more children whose parents can afford to buy their own, while at least 700,000 children from poor families get not help at all.

There are limitations to government action in this as in other fields--and we all have the responsibility of seeing to it that the government programs we do have are both efficient and effective.

I am honored to have been given the privilege of making these keynote remarks at your very important conference. I have spoken as one who is mindful of the common interests of producers and consumers of food in America. I wish you well in your workshop meetings and will be awaiting their finds and recommendations.