

The Food Problem Is Bigger Than "Farm Surpluses"

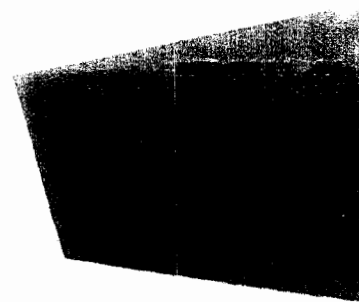
TO HEAR some people talk you might think that we have been cursed with what in any other age or country would be considered a blessing—too much food. True, we have been troubled with the economic and political problems posed by farm surpluses in recent years. But, looking a bit beyond our noses, do we really have a problem of overproduction? Would not many people in this country benefit by more food? What about the rapid increase in U. S. population expected in the next several decades? And then in a larger sense, what about the food requirements of the rest of the world? It is likely that rather than having long-continued surpluses we will really have to start scratching on a global basis. Fortunately there are some optimistic views. The FAO says that the world can feed itself. Not only will it be possible to keep agricultural production in pace with population growth, but a reasonable standard of nutrition can be assured for all. The hindrances to progress, they say, are not technical but, rather, economic, social, and political.

Happy examples are cited of progress: A 50% increase in livestock production per breeding unit in the U. S. in 30 years; a 200% increase in wool per sheep in Australia in a century; vast increases in milk and meat yields in Western Europe during two centuries.

The report continues, to state that there are few spheres of exploitation which promise greater results for relatively small expenditures of funds. It also suggests that this area of efforts lends itself particularly readily to international cooperation. An organization with a world basis of supplies, equipment, and personnel to combat plant and animal diseases and prevent epidemics is envisioned as one which could provide exceptionally high returns per unit of effort expended.

The report mentions many things which could be done to improve the food situation of the future. It points out that tremendous resources are being wasted over the world. Storage losses alone are estimated at 10% of the total. That means that materials at least have been gathered, and many of them processed, then allowed to be lost, wasting not only goods but also effort. In only a few countries have natural rainfall and river flow been channeled in the most useful and productive directions.

Utilization of marine sources of food has advanced only a little, in comparison to envisioned possibilities, beyond the level used by our great grandfathers. But much is known today which could be applied to farming the sea and which indicates food producing possibilities that would astound and stagger the average citizen. The science of animal husbandry is highly developed, but how much thought has been given to fish husbandry? Fish are food; the pastures are extensive. Aren't we who



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pride ourselves on knowing a good thing when we see it, missing a good bet?

The FAO report makes what it calls a conservative estimate that optimum use of fertilizers would raise crop yields on an average of 30% around the world—excluding areas where fertilizers already are extensively used. Conservative indeed! In the pages of this issue are less conservative estimates by men who have studied the situation in the U. S. They point out, for example, that in the bread basket of the U. S. A. food production could be doubled, under pressure of necessity, by use of fertilizer and improved practices.

Our impression is that American agriculturalists consider their technology of farming to be exceeded by none, but a comparison of fertilizer consumption in the U. S. with that in Holland, for example, makes us inclined to grasp for reasons why such high level applications aren't desired in our country.

Of course, our citizens aren't accustomed to facing starvation. Rather, our problem is one of economics and distribution of some agricultural products which do not find a full market at present. Such imbalances can result in failure of industries which do not adjust or to defeat of government administrations which cannot cope with them.

But hunger and poor diet are more basic and if we are to accept the ideas suggested by our increasing population figures we dare not forget it. Then we must look constantly toward improving our food-producing ability. Referring again to the pages of this issue we find cause for optimism. Not only does appraisal of the potential use of fertilizers indicate that we're by no means at the end of our rope; the observations of men who have achieved success by "knowing the situation" make it clear that the farmer is not standing still. One says for example: "The type of farmer who not long ago maintained no fertilizer is worth more than a dollar a sack is now happy to pay over five cents per pound for high analysis goods." That the old, ultimate driving force is coming into play can be seen in the expressions of opinion that the farmer will realize that the way to bring up a declining income is to operate more efficiently—and fertilizers can be the basis of more efficient farming.

We agree with the FAO that it is possible not only for agricultural production to keep pace with population growth in the world, but also to ensure a reasonable standard of nutrition for all. The big problem appears to be less one of natural resources than of the will and discipline to make use of those resources.