SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL FOOD PRICE WARS

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This is not the first time our nation has faced a far-reaching crisis that threatened our soil and water resources. Just as the current environmental crisis is simultaneous and interwoven with the economic crisis in the countryside, the agricultural economic depression of the 1920's, which rolled into the cities in the 1930's was simultaneous with a national environmental crisis.

Some modern writers often mistakenly describe the agricultural depression in the U.S. as being caused by the Dust Bowl era of drought, blinding sandstorms, and parched earth. In fact, the opposite was closer to the truth. Falling farm prices in the 1920's and 30's led first to the abandonment of standard conservation practices, like terracing. As the crisis worsened, farmers were forced to intensify the production in hopes of making up for lower prices with greater volume. Crop rotations had to be abandoned, heavier equipment was introduced, and the centuries old practice of allowing fields to lie fallow gave way to year after year of intensive cropping.

Throughout the depression decade of the 1920's, farmers brought more and more land into production to make up for low commodity prices. Total acres under cultivation in the U.S. reached a peak in 1931. The peak was not reached again until the early 1980's after a period of unstable farm prices and high inflation in the 1970's led to another massive expansion in acreage. This forcing of marginal lands into production is another similarity between the Great Depression and the current one in U.S. agriculture.

Even with cost-cutting and more intensive production, many farmers could not survive the Great Depression. Literally millions of acres were abandoned, left to dry up and blow away.

In some instances, farms weren't abandoned, they were foreclosed by insurance companies and other lenders, who farmed these repossessed properties with an eye toward short-term, immediate returns - not the long term protection of the land.

The battle waged by farmers of that era to restore profitability to family farm agriculture was closely tied with the forging of a national policy to repair and restore the soil and water resources. The founding of our National Soil Conservation Service in 1936 was simultaneous with the introduction of national farm programs which restored profitability to farmers.

The farm commodity programs provided two crucial elements in the national campaign to protect our soil. First of all, the program provided a price support mechanism that kept prices at or above the cost of production, giving farmers the money they needed to buy back their land and to make the conservation investments needed. You can walk the fields of rural America and physically see the explosion of conservation investment that this era provided.

But just as importantly, the farm programs included strong supply management provisions to halt the year-after-year of surplus production that was destroying America's soils, and which allowed farmers to de-intensify their production by restricting the amount of certain commodities that farmers could produce or sell.

These three factors - fair prices to farmers, supply management, and specific soil conservation programs funded by the government laid the foundations for the economic recovery of farmers and the environmental recovery of the countryside. But it only lasted for 20 years.

Although these farm programs were the key to survival for farmers and provided the basis for restoring our soil and water, two very powerful forces opposed these programs.

The first were the grain and other commodity exporting corporations who opposed the price support programs. They wanted to pay farmers the lowest price possible to maximize their profits - even if it meant that farmers would have no money left over to maintain their soil conservation efforts.

At the same time, the agri-chemical firms who sold pesticides, fertilizer, and hybrid seed opposed the supply management programs. They believed that if farmers were controlling their production then they would sell less chemicals - which in fact was true.

The combined force of these two industries were able to gradually repeal the successful farm programs of the Roosevelt era, beginning in 1953.

From 1953 to the early 1970's our nation went through a very traumatic and chaotic period of agricultural policy. As farm prices were forced downwards, farmers produced larger and larger crops to try to maintain their cash flow. Productivity gains were huge from improved varieties and greatly increased use of fertilizers and chemicals.

Without effective supply management, huge surpluses accumulated as a result

Many times, as I was growing up, we would end up with so much corn that it would have to be stored on the ground, outside, all winter long. It got so bad that a huge land set-aside program - the Soil Bank - was introduced in the 1960's. The government paid farmers to idle 28 million acres of land in this program, at a considerable cost to taxpayers. But in spite of this large conservation investment, all of this land and more - including steep slopes, wetlands, sandy prairie, vital wind breaks and grassy areas - was pressed back into intensive production in the 1970"s.

In the decade of the 1970's, federal policy shifted sharply away from a supply management and conservation orientation to one of all-out production. An unusual confluence of world trade and weather factors in 1973 led to a brief upsurge in farm commodity prices that has never been repeated. Yet the memory of those high prices fueled a rapid mobilization among farmers for all out production for the world market.

The agri-business infrastructure nurtured this mentality of fence-row to fence-row production. The corporations in their advertising idolized the big farmer, expanding his farm, his production, and his investment. Banks and other lenders encouraged this investment for all out production. Agricultural college advisors, farm media personalities, and government agencies all encouraged intensification of production and expansion of farm size.

I was working as a hired hand on my parents' dairy farm in the mid-seventies, and my wife and I were trying to borrow money to buy our own farm. But our goal of starting a traditional moderate-sized Iowa farm went against the grain of the expansion minded lenders. We had great difficulty in finding financing because our plans were too modest - we weren't thinking big enough.

This expansionist mentality served the deeper policy goals of the corporate input suppliers and the grain trade whose forces had come to dominate federal farm policy. But all out production for an expanded export market proved, as it always has, to be in contradiction with price stability for farmers, who still maintained important political power. So a new farm program mechanism was developed in the 1970's - the target price system.

Under this system, grain farmers were paid a direct subsidy from taxpayers on each bushel produced to make up for market prices that were set below the cost of production by low government price floors. These government payments provided grain farmers minimal income protection, but allowed the export conglomerates to pursue their world market expansion with commodities they bought at less than the cost of production.

This allowed our corporations to go into the world market and displace other exporters and local farmers from markets around the world. The U.S. share of the world market rose from 40% in the early 1970's to nearly 70% by the 1980's.

But this approach proved to be expensive in more ways than one. The Vietnam War and basic changes in the economy made federal budget deficits a growing concern. The high cost of subsidizing cheap raw farm products for the corporations required the "target prices" which were met with subsidies to be set too low to cover the needs of the average farmer.

In spite of it's aura as a "boom" decade, the 1970's saw only a very brief period of high returns for farmers. During most of the decade, farmers produced at a loss and were only kept in business by two factors that went hand in hand - increasing debt on inflating land values and intensifying production.

Although farmers lost money on their crops, they were able to borrow more and more against their land, to both cover losses and to intensify operations in hopes of boosting production enough to recover from the falling prices. In slightly over a decade, farm debt rose from $30 billion to $230 billion. Massive land inflation and the willingness of lenders to lend money on the inflated value gave a false sense of optimism to this world market oriented policy.

I was working for my father in the mid-seventies on the farm where I had grown up. This was in the heart of some of the most level and productive farmland in the U.S. My wife and I wanted to buy our own farm, but general inflation and the expansionist mentality had already caused land prices in that price region to more than double.

So we moved to southern Iowa, where the land was more hilly, less productive, and less expensive - but well suited to dairy farming. The dairy industry was different from the rest of the agriculture then in that milk price supports were still relatively high. The return on dairying was good in the seventies.

We finally found financing for our 160 acre, 20 cow farm through the government lending agency, the Farmers Home Administration, but only with a lot of arguing. Most lenders considered our farm plan to be too conservative, although it was quite typical of Iowa dairy farms up until that period. With high milk prices and low feed grain prices, the seventies saw much expansion of dairy in hilly southern Iowa. Large barns housing hundreds of cows were built around the region.

Many of those barns today sit empty. Their bankrupt owners were victims of the cheap grain policy that encouraged over-production of milk. The burdensome dairy surpluses that led the Reagan Administration to drastically cut milk prices were directly attributable to a glut of cheap feed.

The livestock industry as a whole has suffered severely in the U.S. from cheap feed grains. As farmers have expanded in livestock to increase their return on low-priced grains over the last 15 years, hogs, cattle, and dairy have all suffered price declines. The result has been many more family livestock farms busted, and more hills put to the plow that were once grazed by cattle.

By moving from the prime land of north central Iowa, where farms had reached a price of nearly $2000 per acre by 1977, to southern Iowa, we were able to buy our farm for $900 per acre. With milk prices high at that time, we were off to an encouraging start. We borrowed another two hundred dollars per acre to invest in a pond, terraces, and other conservation improvements.

But for agriculture as a whole, the massively escalating debt and the policy of maximum production had precipitated a growing environmental crisis in the countryside.

Bankers and other lenders took greater control over farming, dictating more and more production practices - almost always pushing more intensification - more acres, more machinery, more chemicals.

Farmers were forced more and more into tenant farming arrangements, or into renting land. The break in the historic ownership link meant a sharp change in consciousness, as farmers no longer had hopes of buying the land or passing it on to their children, which was a strong incentive to preserve the land. Simple survival became the top priority.

Perhaps the greatest environmental concern was the rapid growth of huge superfarms - some owned by wealthy individuals or families and some by big corporations. Huge irrigation systems bled dry underground aquifers, massive doses of chemicals and artificial fertilizers poisoned the water and killed the essential living organisms in the earth, and ever-larger pieces of equipment compacted the soil to the point that special deep-tillage implements requiring enormous power were developed to loosen it up.

The increasingly obvious environmental costs of the expansionist policy led to the development of "conservation tillage" techniques. Using various new tillage implements and management techniques, conservation tillage results in increased plant residues on the soil surface to inhibit erosion. Although the rate of adoption of these techniques by farmers has been high and real soil savings have occurred, the end results have been mixed.

In many cases, conservation tillage has led to increased use of herbicides and insecticides, contributing to the growing groundwater pollution in the U.S. And with the advent of "no-till" planters, we're seeing hilly pasture ground that hasn't been tilled for decades going into row crop. After the sod is killed by herbicides the first year, these hillsides are left exposed to extreme water erosion.

Increasing erosion and pollution problems indicate that conservation tillage alone cannot address the environmental degradation caused by a policy of all out production at any cost.

Although the 1970's were a time of widespread false optimism, many farmers in the U.S. were not fooled about the long-term viability of the system - either economically or ecologically.

Two movements of farmers were launched in the 1970's in direct response to a growing sense of crisis.

The first was the growth in organic, natural, and biological farming that accompanied the explosion of the health food industry in the U.S. in the early 1970's.

The second was the Farm Strike, led by the American Agriculture Movement, that grew out of the growing crisis in 1977 and 1978. This movement demanded an end to the low prices and high subsidy policies of the federal government. We were fighting to hang onto our land.

I participated in both of these movements. I returned to the farm from college in 1973 with a keen sense of environmental concern which was outraged by the trends in agriculture. To any objective observer, the increasing monoculture, massive use of chemicals and fertilizers, high concentrations of specialized livestock facilities, and general pressure to produce had created a system that was quite unsustainable. Yet "official" sources of information - the Extension Service, the colleges, the corporations - recognized no alternatives.

Farmers themselves - experimenting on their own, using age old techniques of crop rotation and fertility building, trying new ideas and sharing them with like-minded farmers - had to build the biological farming movement of the 1970's in opposition to the conventional wisdom. I learned from my father and from experienced organic farmers how to farm in a sustainable manner.

Since buying our own farm 10 years ago, we've used no herbicides or insecticides and very little commercial fertilizer. We practice a full rotation of crops that leaves a limited amount of ground exposed to erosion. We've built up our soil with the fertility of cow manure and crop residues.

The results have been positive - reduced erosion, average crop yields, excellent herd health and milk production, and some cost savings. This kind of result is common and has led to a continuing slow growth in the U.S. of sustainable farming practices.

However, it was clear from the beginning that the cost savings from biological agriculture would not be enough to make up for low prices. Many farmers in the seventies became uneasy about the dependence of agriculture on increasing debt. A sense of impending disaster sparked a remarkable grassroots phenomenon called the American Agriculture Movement in 1977.

Farmers across the country rose up in protest, driving their tractors in "tractorcades" to demand higher prices. Although nurtured in many instances by the traditional progressive farm organizations, the American Agriculture Movement as a whole was diffuse and spontaneous. Eventually, 40,000 farmers converged on Washington, D.C., demanding "parity" for agriculture and warning of dire consequences for the system if we didn't get it. Unfortunately, the warning went unheeded. President Carter, the Congress, and the American people had all been fooled by the false optimism of our market oriented approach.

In the early 1980's our whole system began to collapse. Land prices began to fall, making it impossible to borrow enough new money to cover year after year of low prices.

Liquidations of farm families reached levels higher than in the 1930's. Suicides, family break-up, alcoholism and mental depression became a worsening reality in rural America.

And soil erosion and groundwater contamination, as in the 1930's, continued to accelerate.

The level of production intensity has never been as high, as farmers try to squeeze every last bushel out off the land to survive.

With record numbers of foreclosures and bankruptcies, hundreds of thousands of acres of land are falling into the hands of speculators, lenders, and insurance companies. A good example of the crisis this is creating was documented by the Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota.

Ed Hauck was an award-winning conservation farmer in Wabaska County, Minnesota. He bought a badly eroded farm in 1958 and restored it to model condition with terraces, strip cropping, waterways, and contour farming. By 1984, Hauck had cut soil erosion to less than 3 tons per acre per year.

But that year Hauck lost his farm in foreclosure to John Hancock Life Insurance Company of Boston. The insurance company rented the land to a farmer who plowed up the whole farm fence row to fence row. To maximize "efficiency," 27 years worth of conservation work on terraces, waterways, and contours was destroyed - work that had been supported with thousands of dollars of taxpayers money. The predicted soil loss is now 35-40 tons per acre.

This situation is all too common as foreclosures have continued unabated and the value of insurance company's landholdings more than doubled in states like Iowa just from the end of 1985 to 1986. Insurance companies now own 4.1

million acres in the U.S. valued at $2.3 billion. When insurance companies, lenders, speculators, and other absentee landowners take over the land, the record shows that conservation suffers.

This backdrop of economic and environmental crisis confronted farmers and farm organizations as we began formulating an alternative to the Reagan Farm Policy as early as 1981. In the face of the power and wealth of the corporate dominated American Farm Bureau Federation, the weaker progressive farm organizations such as the American Agriculture Movement and the National Farmers Union joined forces in new coalitions with "grassroots" organizations that sprang up nationwide in response to the crisis.

These coalitions gradually developed a common program and principles through many meetings involving farmers from all over the country over an extended period of time. The movement to save family farming eventually took shape as the farm coalitions reached out to the churches, labor unions, and other progressive constituencies for support.

Operating much like a loose-knit political campaign, the farm movement has developed a tremendous capacity to do public education through the media, local organizing, and lobbying for legislation through phone calls, letters, and visits to Washington. Family farmers, in the midst of their worst crisis in 50 years, at least have a stronger organized voice than they have had for many years.

In 1985 we drafted an alternative farm bill, including cost of production farm prices, supply management to reduce the intensity of production, and a 50 million acre conservation reserve to take fragile land out of production permanently.

At first we had good support from environmental groups. But President Reagan and his allies in Congress had a good strategy. They agreed to include the conservation reserve in their proposal to cut prices - and by so doing were able to split many environmental groups off from the farm movement.

In addition, 47 liberal, urban Democrats sided with Reagan, believing that lower farm prices would be better for the hungry nations around the world, thinking that they could buy more food to feed their hungry people if it was cheaper. Clearly they had not thought about the devastating effect that cheap U.S. grain exports have had on food self-sufficiency in the Third World.

With the defection of some environmentalists and liberal Democrats to the Reagan camp, the Administration was able to put together enough votes to pass the 1985 Farm Bill. The bill gave us significant new conservation measures, but cut farm prices dramatically, accelerating the family farm foreclosures and consolidation of land into the hands of the wealthy, insurance companies, and lenders. The conservation measures, hailed by the environmental community as a great victory, are proving of more dubious benefit.

Conservation compliance, "sodbuster," and "swamp-buster" provisions were intended to force conservation practices on highly erodible land currently tilled and to prevent new ground in this category from coming under the plow. But efforts to enforce compliance with these provisions have run right up against the economic realities created by the bill. The economic pressure to produce is so great that the government has been pushed to weaken the rules and to delay compliance and enforcement which would greatly reduce the beneficial impact of these provisions.

The Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to idle land for 10 years, has also failed to live up to expectations. Although it's good to see many steep hillsides back in grass again, loose eligibility criteria has allowed much land that could have been farmed with good conservation practices into the reserve. As a result, the CRP may have to be greatly expanded at a much greater cost to bring in the most highly erodible ground.

And the nagging question always remains: after ten years and billions of dollars in government payments, what will then happen to this fragile land. Like the Soil Bank of the 1960's, it could be forced right back into use by a policy of maximum production.

The 1985 Farm Bill has taken much land out of production through the CRP, the set-aside, and the paid diversion. But because it lacks the marketing controls that our farm bill alternative would have incorporated, the 1985 Bill has actually encouraged more intensive farming of the remaining land under production. Increasing chemical pollution and continuing soil erosion is the result.

Some have suggested that lower prices have forced farmers to cut back on chemical usage, but nothing could be further from the truth. My neighbors are using more fertilizers and pesticides than ever, squeezing out every bushel per acre they can, to make up for low prices and a big set-aside.

The contamination of groundwater by nitrate fertilizers alone have made many of the wells in my part of the country unsafe for drinking. With an increasing concentration of long-lasting carcinogenic pesticides in the groundwater, agricultural pollution has become a hotly discussed national issue.

The 1985 Farm Bill has accelerated the elimination of livestock from much of the countryside. It provided a program to buy out whole dairy herds from family farmers even as new 2,000 cow facilities were being built. The bill encourages increased concentration in hog and fat cattle production also, with associated problems of manure disposal. Elimination of cattle herds has left many farmers with little choice but to plow up hillsides. Predicted lower prices for dairy, hogs, and beef cattle will continue this trend.

On my own farm, I have been forced to expand from 20 to 40 cows to try to keep up with the Reagan price cuts in milk. And I've rented an additional 80 acres. This is consistent with the trend toward fewer farmers, but increased production. Like the majority of American farmers, I face an uncertain future with high debt and drastically reduced land values.

But the environmental impact of the U.S. Farm Bill doesn't stop at our borders. Due to our overwhelming dominance in the world market, our policies very much affect the whole world - and our politicians know it.

Especially in relation to Third World countries - both the emerging food exporters like Brazil and Argentina and the hungry importing nations - the Reagan Administration policy has been intentional - and deadly.

Republican farm policy spokesman, Senator Rudy Boschwitz, outlined the goal of discouraging the Third World exporters in a letter to Time Magazine describing Republican intentions. "If we do not lower our farm prices to discourage these countries now, our worldwide competitive position will continue to slide and be much more difficult to regain. This discouragement should be one of the foremost goals of our agricultural policy".

Although their goal was to put these Third World Countries out of business, a moral outrage in and of itself, the actual result has been the opposite and equally disturbing.

Faced with enormous overseas debts that must be paid with hard currency earned through exports, these countries are unable to simply go out of business. Perhaps they could but our U.S. banks would be the first, and greatest victims.

Most of these countries have responded to the U.S. setting world prices lower by simply expanding their acreage and their production - in hopes of boosting export sales enough to recover in volume what they lose with the low prices - just like the farmers have done in the U.S.

President Alfousin, in an interview with U.S. columnist Jack Anderson made this point clear, he laid out the need for Argentina to expand exports to keep up their earnings.

Brazil is opening hundreds of millions of new acres, much of it extremely fragile in order to expand exports enough to keep up their cash flow.

It's ironic that we are destroying rain forests in Central America to produce cattle which are then shipped to the United States putting U.S. livestock producers out of business. When the U.S. producers are forced to abandon cattle production their fragile pastures and hillsides often are converted to row crops, such as soybeans, which have a devastating effect through soil erosion and increasing run off of agricultural chemicals.

Although some countries have been able to make up a part of their losses, most have not been able to make up enough. Falling export earnings have translated in more external debt, less money to import fuels or medicines, and a lot less money available to care for environmental concerns.

Perhaps worse - it has accelerated the trend towards the industrialization of the Third World - with all the accompanying pollution and poisons and with the increased competition with industries in the North - as the prices for commodities on the world market fall further and further.

The impact of the U.S. decision to slash the price of rice is
yet another example of the impact of U.S. price cutting policies on the Third World. The 1985 U.S. Farm Bill included a special provision for rice

and cotton, called marketing loans, to provide an additional export subsidy above the regular deficiency payments. It gave the U.S. the ability to lower world prices from around $8 per hundredweight to less than $4.

According to the Washington Post, the U.S. will spend up to $17 for each hundredweight (cwt) of new rice exports, currently worth only $4 per CWT.

One of the main targets of the U.S. action was Thailand, one of the world's major rice exporters, where rice exports bring in 15% of their much needed foreign exchange. Rice farming is also the sole source of income for many of the 4 million Thai farmers. U.S. action to cut world rice prices in half last year threw their economy into a crisis, prompting demonstrations against the U.S. Farm Bill at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok.

But no matter how far the U.S. may lower world rice prices, Thailand's huge external debt to both U.S. and European banks makes it impossible for them to cut back on their exports. Instead of reducing production, as hoped by the U.S., the Thais have simply lowered their prices to remain competitive with the U.S. price and increased their volume of production to maintain their cash flow needed to meet their debt obligations. They opened up huge new regions of the country to rice production for export.

Although this U.S. policy has created a serious economic and political crisis for Thailand, by far the most serious impacts have been on the rice producers in the poorest countries in West Africa. Local farmers in this region, struggling to build up their productive capacity in order to feed their own nations, are being squeezed out of business by heavily subsidized U.S. rice, priced nearly $80 per ton below the local costs of production, roughly $140 per ton below the U.S. cost of production.

Not only has this severely damaged efforts of these nations to build food self-reliance, it has forced them to divert scarce foreign exchange earnings to pay for this imported rice, resulting in a cutback of other imports like fuel, medicines or capital goods for long-term development.

In addition to trying to put out of business Third World exporters, the Reagan Administration also has clearly targeted the hungry food importing nations as well. Reagan's Agriculture Secretary during the 1985 Farm Bill debate, John Block, spelled out their strategy very clearly.

> "The push by some developing countries to become more self-sufficient in food may be reminiscent of a by-gone era. Those countries could save money by importing more food from the U.S. Modern trade practices may mean that the world's major food producing nation's, especially the U.S., are the best source of food for some developing nations."

This strategy has been reinforced by cutting U.S. prices so far below the cost of production that we force out of business local producers around the world.

This is an environmental catastrophe.

One example is the damage being done to rain forests by farmers around the edges who are not able to survive on their land due to the low prices. Many are forced to begin "poaching" the rain forest - slashing and planting one section of forest for a year or two, and then moving on to slash and cultivate a new piece. This poaching is thought to be responsible for a significant percentage of the rain forest destruction.

And we cannot hope to stop this practice if farmers and peasants cannot get a decent price for their crops grown on the land already cleared.

The U.S. decision to cut world prices in the 1985 Farm Bill had a dramatic impact on the entire world. The sugar workers on the Philippines sugar island of Negros, are an another example.

There has been a huge drop in U.S. beet and cane sugar consumption as a result of the 1985 Farm Bill. By using massive deficiency payment subsidies to force down the price of corn, the 1985 U.S. Farm Bill has made it possible to produce high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) at a much lower price than the cost of production for beet or cane sugar. In the U.S., this has triggered a massive shift from sugar to HFCS by the carbonated beverage industry and other food processors. Last year the average person in the US consumed more corn sweeteners than sugar.

One immediate effect of this shift has been a huge reduction in U.S. sugar import quotas. The Philippines, for example, has suffered a 60% cut in their U.S. marketshare quota. There are now nearly a quarter million people slowing starving to death on the island of Negros, thrown out of work because of the loss of the U.S. sweetener market to heavily subsidized corn.

The next round of price cuts proposed by the Reagan Administration will make corn so cheap it may be economically feasible to convert corn sweeteners into a crystalized form, which would totally ruin the world sugar trade. Already the U.S. is predicting an end to its sugar imports by 1990. The question is whether cheap, heavily subsidized corn will allow the U.S. to become a major exporter of sweeteners in direct, and devastating competition with the sugar producers of the Third World.

This has put Third World producers in a terrible squeeze, and will undoubtedly lead to a push by ACP sugar producers to get Europe to import even more of their production to make up for some of the lost U.S. markets and increased competition from U.S. produced HFCS.

Reducing the production quota for the European Community's sugar producers is one proposal for dealing with this problem, but will unfortunately have very little impact on either world prices or the over-supply situation in the world.

Reagan's victory has meant that we must work harder, improve our arguments, and build new coalitions.

This is exactly what we did in 1986. Farm activists teamed up with peace groups, civil rights organizations, environmentalists, labor, churches, and many others in the elections. In 10 farm states, coalitions mounted serious challenges to incumbent Republican senators who had been die-hard supporters of Reagan. Even before Irangate broke we were able to mount successful challenges to Reagan's policies, throwing out of office six incumbents, giving Democrats control over the Senate and the Congress.

In three of those states, North Dakota, South Dakota and Colorado, farmer votes for progressive Democrats was 2 to 1, providing a margin of victory in these races.

With these victories, the stage has been set for a new national campaign to reverse Reagan's policies - and for an exciting Presidential election in 1988. The Republican contenders are lining up solidly behind Reagan's policies as defenders of the 1985 Farm Bill.

But all the leading Democratic contenders advocate a sharp break with Reagan's policies with higher market prices and effective supply management. Most are either sponsors or endorsers of the farm movement's alternative legislation - the Family Farm Act - such as Congressman Gephardt, Rev. Jackson, Senator Simon, and Congresswoman Schroeder.

The strong possibility of a Democratic victory in 1988 has significant implications for the world situation.

The agri-business corporations who have profited greatly from the current administration have themselves concluded that they are likely to be out of control after 1988, and they are moving to make as many gains as possible before 1988.

Perhaps most significant from an environmental point of view is the Reagan Administration's recently launched offensive to re-structure the world's food system through the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) negotiations.

Reagan made a proposal to force through changes in the world food trading rules that would extend to the whole world the disastrous policies that have ruined rural America.

He has proposed four main demands:

•First, to cut farm prices worldwide.
•Second, to stop countries from protecting their borders from cheap food exports.
•Third, to stop export subsidies.
•Fourth, to make all the rest of the world accept U.S. standards for allowable additives, hormones, and impurities in food.

If Reagan gets his way - the disaster, both economic and environmental, that we face in the U.S. will become global. We now must move beyond our national borders to form a global campaign to stop this Reagan initiative. Europe is probably the most crucial place to begin expanding this campaign.

We must stop the Reagan Administration and the grain corporations from pushing commodity prices down even further. Perhaps even more importantly, we must defend the right of all countries - Third World, Europe, the U.S., and others to protect their borders from imports.

For Third World countries, they must be able to protect their local farmers from being wiped out by cheap, subsidized exports. At the same time, we must be able to control imports in Northern countries if we are going to have effective supply management programs to protect our soils and to prevent surplus.

Reagan's third demand, an end to export subsidies, is a positive goal, although it should be pointed out that the Reagan Administration has spent more money in export subsidies, both direct and indirect, than all past administrations combined, and a great deal more than Europe. We must demand an end to export subsidies, but we should not confuse this with Reagan's overall free market push.

We need a global campaign to insure that farmers and peasants regain control on the land - and we need a global campaign to insure that the land is being farmed in an environmentally sustainable way.

This is becoming more and more crucial as we approach the 21st century when, increasingly, our economy will be based on the transformation of the products we grow on our farms into the fuel, fiber, medicine, and manufactured goods that our whole society will need.

This can be a bright future - with our economy transformed from one based on rapidly depleting - non-renewable, and highly polluting petroleum and coal to one based on renewable resources -- plants and trees, which can, if we choose, be grown and transformed in an environmentally safe way.

But this bio-industrial revolution also be a dark future -- if corporations take control of the land and the means of producing this food and fiber we now grow. Once in direct control they could choose to intensify the chemical and energy dependency of agriculture, hastening the environmental catastrophe.

We're already seeing the threat of a few corporations controlling the seeds and germ plasm - and they are trying to take control over life itself, by gaining the right to patent new animals, as they have recently done in the US.

We need a global campaign to make sure that family farmers and peasants can control the land, and that the values of sustainability, safety, and quality guide this new bio-technological future.

There are many examples for us to follow in the global effort. The Nestle boycott, the Cola campaign, and the worldwide efforts of the Pesticide Action Network. Perhaps a campaign against the Cargill Corporation is a place to begin.

But whatever direction we take, we must maintain the inter-linked concepts of who controls the land and how the land is treated. We must be sure that our struggles for land reform are broadened to include what's grown on the land and how it's grown. And our struggle for sustainable agriculture must include the economics to insure widespread, diversified family farm control. Only together can we win both struggles. Separated - we will lose it all.

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Dixon Terry has been a leader in the struggle to save the family farm for over ten years. He was instrumental in the formation and continuing effectiveness of the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition. Most recently he has served as the Chair of the Iowa League of Rural Voters and the National Co-Chair of the League of Rural Voters Education Project. His personal long term commitment to the ideals of sustainable agriculture have shaped his work and his analysis of the present farm and environmental crisis.

The League of Rural Voters Education Project is dedicated to increasing the effective participation of rural voters in the political process. Since 1983, the League has provided educational media tools, a national strategy, and various educational publications to help rural people change the political roots of the current farm crisis.

Additional Reading and Resources

- "Crisis By Design: A Brief Review of U.S Farm Policy," Mark Ritchie & Kevin Ristau, LRVEP, 1988, $2.00*.
- "Beyond the Crisis: Solutions for Rural America," LRVEP (slideshow), 1988, $80*.
- "Loss of Our Family Farms - Inevitable Results or Conscious Policies?," Mark Ritchie, LRV, 1979, $4.00*.
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- "The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America," Lawrence Goodwyn, Oxford Univ. Press, NY, 1978.

*Available from the League of Rural Voters Education Project.

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