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Does the USDA have a new agricultural research policy ?

At a press conference in Fresno, California in mid-December, 1979, Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland apparently enunciated a new research policy for the United States Department of Agriculture when he stated: "I do not think that Federal funding for labor-saving devices is a proper use of Federal money. This is something that should be left to private enterprise and to the state universities, if they choose, in my view. But I will not put Federal money into any project that results in saving farm labor."

I think the Secretary is dead wrong in taking this position, for any number of reasons. His "new" research policy casts a wide net which, I believe, catches activities that work in the best interests of the United States and are ignored by the Secretary. This country remains at or near the top among all nations in the world in producing agricultural products for export. The value of these exports was about \$38 billion for 1979. California, together with Illinois and Iowa, accounts for nearly 30 percent of that total value. In view of the tremendous bill we pay for imported petroleum, this volume of exported agricultural products is increasingly important in lessening the deficit of our trade balance.

Research and technology play important roles in keeping the U.S. competitive in world agriculture. Any loss of the competitive edge we enjoy will see not only the farmer and farm laborers lose their livelihoods, but also other industrial workers who process and handle the products farmers produce.

California lost an asparagus industry and nearly lost the processing tomato industry to foreign competition. Our shoes and many of our garments are now imported. Television sets, radios, watches, and cameras are imported, and we all know how our small automobile market has been absorbed by other countries. We certainly don't want to see the same thing happen to our food industry.

Imagine our economic disadvantage if both our food and energy supplies were subject to foreign domination. From this standpoint alone the U.S. should have a well-defined policy which promotes the efficiency of our food- and fiber-producing capacity. Private enterprise alone was not able to preserve the United States' place among its competitors for the items mentioned above and there is no reason to expect private enterprise by itself to preserve our place in food and fiber production and still have these products available at the market place at reasonable prices for the consumer.

The Secretary's net catches another set of activities which are in the public interest. Conserving natural re-

sources used by agriculture and preventing environmental deterioration requires continued research in integrated pest management, improved water-use efficiency, soil reclamation and erosion control. Progress in any of these areas can displace jobs: drip irrigation systems can reduce the demand for irrigators; integrated pest management can reduce the demand for pesticide applicators; nontillage practices will lessen the demand for tractor drivers. There may be more dramatic examples, but these should serve to illustrate the potential impact of the Secretary's announced intention to place no more Federal funds in projects which will lead to a "saving of farm labor."

Finally, let's take a look at the family farmer. The Secretary says he wants to do all he can to keep the family farmer in business. That is a goal I find admirable and worthwhile. Aside from tackling tax structures, land values, costs of money, and developing markets, helping the family farmer remain economically healthy means keeping his productivity increasing at a rate at least as great as the rate of increase in the costs of materials, supplies, and labor needed in the production of agricultural products, or reducing production costs correspondingly.

Most small family farmers eagerly adopt new technologies, many of them labor-saving, not only because they alleviate the physical drudgery of farming, but also because they increase productivity per worker. New technology is often the only thing that keeps the family farmer in the business of farming. Abruptly discontinuing public funding for technological advances, which might displace farm workers, could preserve a farm job but lose the farmer. In that case everybody loses, the family farmer, the farm worker who loses a job, the industry worker who handles the farm product, and the consumer who must now buy perhaps from another more profit-conscious source.

I do not wish to suggest that there need not be concern for the displacement of farm workers. There should be a thoughtful policy and program developed for incorporating farm workers into the employment force. However, that policy should not be such as to condemn farmers to a system of low productivity and noncompetitive prices for their products, and farm laborers to physically-exhausting jobs.

The Secretary of Agriculture should reexamine the consequences of his "new" agricultural research policy. The interests of not only farmers, farm laborers, and consumers, but also of the United States as a country are at stake.