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May 1942

WARTIME MOBILIZATION OF FARM LABOR IN SOUTH DAKOTA

Walter L. Slocum

"The new 1942 goals call for the greatest production in the history of American agriculture. They call for putting every acre of land, every hour of labor, and every bit of farm machinery, fertilizer, and other supplies to the use which will best serve the Nation's wartime needs." Secretary Wickard in The Agricultural Situation, February, 1942.

Plans for the mobilization of farm labor are now being made. All would doubtless agree that these plans should proceed upon the basis of a realistic appraisal of the situation. Part I of this discussion represents an attempt to bring together in one place a summary of the available pertinent information, particularly for the East-River area. Part II presents the writer's interpretation for the significance of these data in terms of action.

I. WHAT ARE THE FACTS?

1. The Typical Farm is a Family Farm. Most of the labor on the typical South Dakota farm is supplied by the operator and by members of his immediate family. This is shown by the fact that during the calendar year of 1939 only 14.3 percent of our farmers hired labor by the month. ^{2/} In some counties the proportion was higher, in others lower (Figure 1). Only 26.3 percent hired labor by the day or by the week. Other hired labor, including piece work and contract jobs involved only 13.3 percent of the operators. There was some overlapping in these categories, that is, some farmers hired more than one type of labor so that only 30,861 or 42.5 percent of the state's 72,454 farm operators hired any labor. Thus, almost six out of each ten operators hired no labor whatever in 1939.

2. Selective Service and Defense Migration will Directly Affect Less Than One Farm Out of Each Three. The operator himself is the main labor force on the typical farm. Complete data ^{3/} from ten East-River counties shows that, in 1938-1939, 62.5 percent of the farm families had only one male member of working age (16-65). In most cases this male was the operator. A small number of farms (3.6 percent) had no male of working age. The percentages of the families having two or more males of working age was: Two, 22.2; three, 7.9; and four or more, 2.8.

These statistics indicate that only about one out of each three farmers (32.9 percent) had a boy who might be called into the armed forces or who might leave to take a defense job. The fact that many farm boys of working age are under 21 and the fact that many are being rejected by the armed forces because of hernia or other physical defects will probably reduce the percentage actually affected to a still lower figure.

1. Department of Rural Sociology, Agricultural Experiment Station, South Dakota State College, Brookings, South Dakota
2. Data from 1940 Census of Agriculture
3. Data from Social Survey of South Dakota Counties and Communities collected by WPA workers under the direction of Dr. W. F. Kumlien, Head, Department of Rural Sociology.

4. Hired Labor is a Rush Season Affair on Most Farms Using It. As stated on page 1, only 14.3 percent of our farmers hired labor by the month in 1939. The number may be even lower this year because of the scarcity of laborers. Workers hired by the day or by the week or on a contract or piecework basis, work mainly during harvest. The peak employment comes during July, August and/or September in most parts of the state. ^{1/} Naturally, the number of harvest workers needed will depend to a large extent upon the size of the crop.

5. Village and City People May Be Used to Some Extent. Plans have been made by state and county labor committees, working in cooperation with the United States Employment Service, to facilitate the employment by farmers of village and city people. An inventory is now being conducted in each county to find out the names and abilities of those who are willing and able to help.

This potential labor force consists mainly of WPA workers, local unskilled laborers, high school and college boys and boys who have left school but are not employed. It is possible that some business men and other regularly employed persons may help to some extent after hours. It is possible, too, that some town girls may help, especially in the farm homes.

It must be anticipated that many, if not most, of the more capable village workers have left to find work in defense plants. Therefore the available supply will be largely young and inexperienced boys plus older men now on WPA. Most of these individuals will be soft and unable, at least at first, to do as well as seasoned farm laborers.

The farmer should not be expected to pay as much for a weak and inexperienced boy as for a strong and experienced man. On the other hand, the farmer should not overwork these young laborers; to do so might result in impairment of health.

Safeguards should be set up to insure that youngsters are not placed on farms where they will be exploited or where health hazards exist. This is a responsibility of neighborhood and community groups.

6. Power Machinery is Concentrated on Particular Farms. Farm labor and farm machinery must be considered together because a deficiency of either results in greater demand for the other. We pride ourselves on the extent to which our farms are mechanized and it is true that all

1. "South Dakota Farm Labor Data," South Dakota Crop and Livestock Reporting Service, Sioux Falls, March 20, 1942

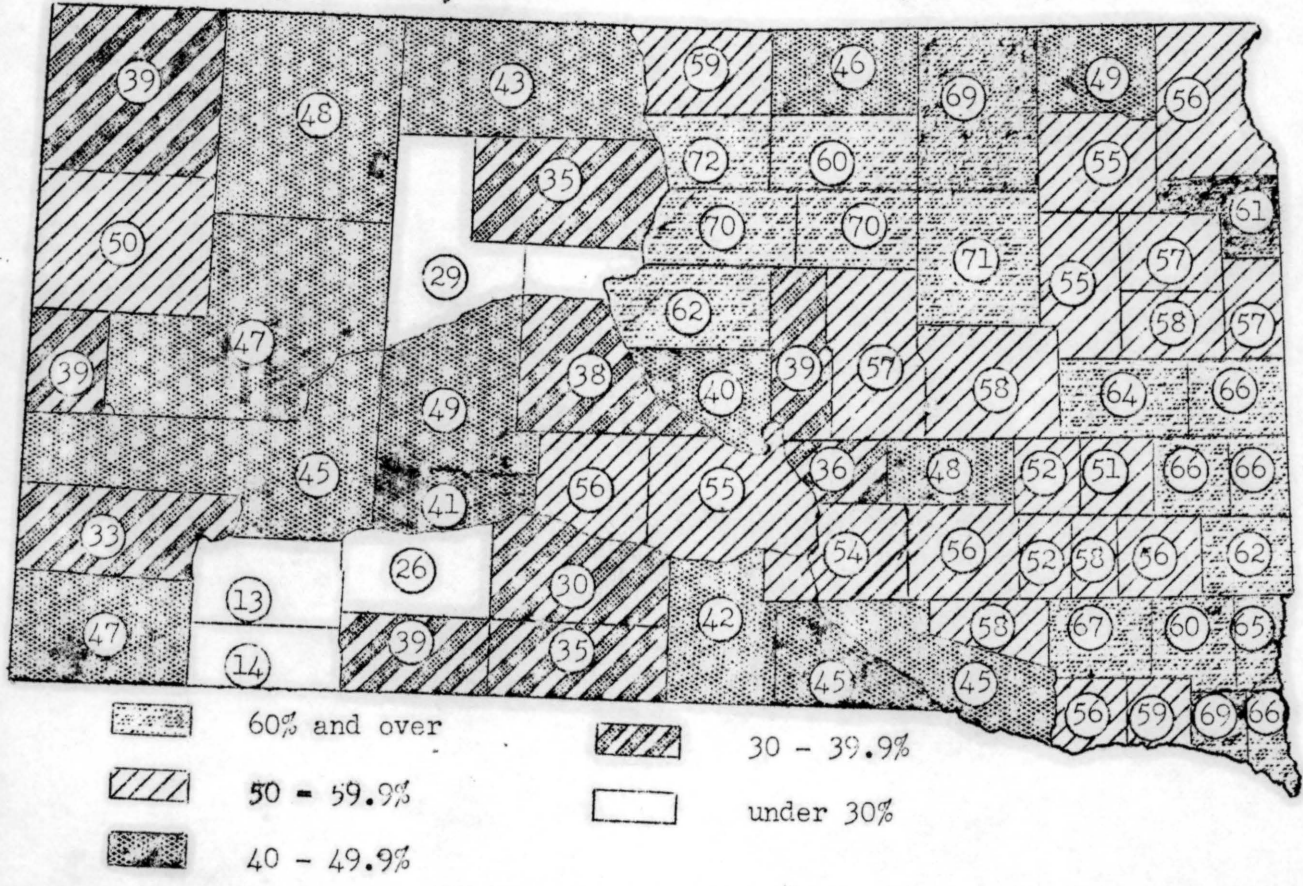
of them use some machinery. There are, however, still many farms that use older types of machinery; in fact, only a little over half of South Dakota farms had tractors in 1940 according to the U. S. Census. The proportion having tractors is, in general, higher in East-River than in West-River counties. (Figure 2) In a few counties more than seven out of each ten operators have tractors.

The most highly mechanized farmers are the part owners, those who own part of the land they operate and rent part of it. Almost seven out of each ten of them (69.7 percent) have tractors. These men operate large farms. The average size of farm operated by a part owner in 1940 was 1,042 acres compared to 398 for tenants and 266 for full owners.

Because farms vary in the degree to which they are mechanized, it may be desirable to make local plans for exchanges to insure the most effective use of the existing machinery. This suggestion is especially applicable to those parts of the state where short crops have resulted in failure to repair or replace harvesting machines.

7. Type of Farming Affects Labor Needs. It is almost self-evident that as the type of farming varies, the labor needs of the farmer also vary. The needs of the beet grower in Butte County differ from the needs of the rancher and the needs of the cash grain farmer differ from either. Farm to farm as well as area differences exist.

Fig 2. PERCENTAGE OF FARMS WITH TRACTORS, APRIL 1, 1940



Source: 1940 Census of Agriculture

II PLANS FOR THE MOBILIZATION OF FARM LABOR

The job of mobilizing our farm manpower involves much more than merely fitting an individual worker into a particular job. There is a larger pattern of which this is but a part although a most important part. Seen in its larger outlines, the job of mobilizing farm labor is a part of the job of organizing our farm neighborhoods and rural communities so that they can more effectively meet wartime conditions. It should be recognized that there is a neighborhood responsibility and a community responsibility in this emergency as well as an individual and a public responsibility.

We are told that this is a war for survival. To furnish the food and fibre that our armies and our allies must have, it may eventually be necessary for farmers, acting in neighborhood, community and county groups to insist that all land, labor and equipment be put to the use that will best serve the general welfare. Already this has been done in England. There the inefficient operator is removed from the land and replaced by someone who can make the land produce what is needed. There machinery pools have been established so that essential machinery does not lie idle when there is work to be done.

The inventory of available labor which is now being made by local farm labor committees will be useful in meeting local needs. The local representatives of the United States Employment Service are to be considered as key men.

In addition to this, there should be room, at least on an experimental basis, for using neighborhood councils to insure the most effective use of labor and machinery through exchanges.

III CHECKING UP

The chances are that 1942 is only a "warm-up" year. The situation in 1943, 1944 and subsequent years may be much more difficult. Machinery will break down and parts will be difficult, if not impossible to get. Men with minor defects may be called for service with the armed forces. Men of military age who have dependents may also be called.

Therefore we should think of 1942 as a test year and devise some means of checking up objectively on the effectiveness of the means used to meet this year's problems. We must do this so that next year's mobilization will be even more effective.