

The Low-Income Farm Problem

By True D. Morse

One of the great opportunities in America today is to improve the stability and welfare of low-income farm families. This segment of agriculture has been sadly neglected.

President Eisenhower must have jolted thinking people in January 1954 when he told Congress:

. . . The chief beneficiaries of our price-support policies have been the 2 million larger, highly mechanized farming units which produce about 85 percent of our agricultural output.

The individual production of the remaining farms, numbering about 3.5 million is so small that the farmer derives little benefit from price supports. . . .

He asked that special attention be given to the problems peculiar to small farmers.

“Development of Agriculture’s Human Resources” was the title of the resulting report and recommendations. The report recognizes that more is at stake than income and levels of living in economic terms. When incomes are low over a long period, participation in the civil and religious life of the community diminishes. People are our most vital resource.

The interest being shown in the new Rural Development Program is extremely encouraging. We know of meetings and activities in at least half of the 48 states, and work is being conducted in other states and local communities.

There is a new determination to be of more help to low-income farm families. All who are truly concerned with farm families and progress for rural America can now support this program to speed aid to farm families who need it most.

Low-income problems of farm families must be attacked on a broad front.

1. FARM INCOMES must be increased. The soil must be made more productive by building up its fertility. More and better livestock and poultry are needed.

This increased productivity will pay off in many ways: reduced family living costs, better nourished families with stronger bodies and improved health, and more cash income.

2. MORE EFFICIENT SIZED FARMS will often be needed.

3. FARM TIMBER is a neglected opportunity on most low-income farms. In many communities half or more of the land is in timber, producing very little income. Land should be put to its most constructive use—farmers cannot afford to have it otherwise.

4. CREDIT NEEDS FOR SMALL FARMERS AND PART-TIME FARMERS must be met. Private lenders can help. Public agencies are seeking needed legislation and funds.

5. INDUSTRIAL EXPANSION is needed in areas of underemployed rural people. This will receive increased encouragement in the interest of national defense and greater industrial strength and stability. A national policy for industrial dispersion as a defense measure was announced as far back as 1951.

Industrial expansion will increase where people can live on small farms and work full time or part time in factories. It is an open door of opportunity for low-income areas.

6. MORE ADEQUATE VOCATIONAL TRAINING is needed for young people. A higher level of skill and technical ability is urgently needed for our rapidly developing industrial era — for farms, industry, and defense. About half of the young people from low-income farm families leave the farms to work in offices and factories, and to assume leadership throughout the United States.

Developing the human resources of our rural areas will bring more prosperity to members of the families living on low-income farms.

7. JOB OPPORTUNITIES must be made known to more low-income farm families. Often these opportunities are in agriculture — either seasonal or full-time employment.

8. HEALTH AND NUTRITIONAL NEEDS must be more adequately met. This is especially important for young people. Whether the young people remain on the farm or go to our cities and industrial centers, too often their health has been impaired because their diets were inadequate, or because they grew up where there were no, or too few, doctors, dentists, and clinics.

9. CHARACTER, MORALS, AND RELIGIOUS QUALITY of our future workers and leadership must be strengthened. The rural churches in numerous communities are weak and neglected. Unless our future citizens receive religious training as children and young people, they are not likely to become strong moral leaders as they grow older or move to cities. The churches have a big job in this total program.

10. COMMUNITY AND TRADE AREA DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS have

already pointed the way to greater farm prosperity and better living in many areas. They stand as monuments to strong and constructive local leadership.

Aggressive farm, business, civic, and other leadership must team up in local efforts to aid in increasing the incomes of small farmers and raising their educational and living standards.

In this program the accent is on youth. Many of these problems can be solved only between generations. The young people have their lives ahead of them. They learn more readily. Their pattern of values has not yet been fixed. They can make changes with less disrupting effect upon their lives, the lives of others, and the community, than is the case with older people.

Low-income farmers are found in every state. Part-time farmers are in every agricultural area and are an important and growing factor in both our rural and industrial development.

About four out of five of our nation's leaders throughout its history have come from a rural environment. We must not fail to develop the human resources of our rural areas.

Senator George D. Aiken in discussing the new program before Congress said:

We have known for years that we should inaugurate and expand a program directed to the plight of low-income rural people. . . .

It will make a stronger America if these low-income farm people become more independent, if more of them can have higher education, if all of them can have better health. . . .

Our goal, Mr. President, should be complete victory over rural poverty. . . .