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INCREASED AGRICULTURAL EXPORTS TO AFRICA MAY BE LIMITED

by

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(Editor's Note: This Newsletter is an excerpt from a talk given by Dr. Daves at Agri-Business Day 1979 which draws heavily from his numerous tours of duty in Africa under the auspices of Governmental and Quasi-Official bodies.)

Much attention is now focused on the potential for expansion of grain exports as a mechanism for improving the net incomes of U.S. grain producers and the U.S. foreign trade balance. Among prospective new or expanded commercial markets for U.S. grain are the developing countries of Africa, many of which had been food self-sufficient until recent years.

Apparently, per capita grain production in Africa has declined over the past 15 years as have total food and total agricultural production per capita, with the result that more imports have been required.

Many problems that lead some observers to project increasing grain deficits and hence import needs include: rapid population growth; ignorance; illiteracy and poverty among African farmers; an often harsh and variable climate; political-social-economic disorganization and instability; primitive technology; lack of infrastructure; and capital shortages. Only recently has progress been made in alleviating these problems, but that it is accelerating leads me to believe that the next 15 years may well see real improvements.

One factor that might temper more pessimistic views is that data upon which these views are based are unreliable. As examples, current population estimates for the African continent developed from various sources differ by

as much as 50 million people. In many African countries, production estimates are made by applying assumed consumption norms to presumed populations, adjusted by official trade statistics and assumed on farm stock levels, losses, clandestine exports and imports, and by just how hungry people look.

Thus it can be argued that even current assessments of African agricultural performance relative to needs are specious and may grossly overstate the problems - but, again, they may understate them. My own observation is that although most people in Africa are very poor by our standards, most also have enough to eat.

A source of optimism relative to African self-sufficiency in grains is the abundance of natural resources. Despite the Sahara Desert, Africa is rich in agricultural land. The North African coast has upwards of 150,000 square miles of some of the world's best wheat land with a dependable growing season. Average wheat yields are less than 10 bushels, so the potential for improvement is great. The Sahelian region across Africa, a 100-150 mile band just south of the Sahara, has even more land of good quality with 15 to 35 inches of rainfall. Large areas are now unused or used only for extensive livestock production.

The tropical rain forest of the western coastal and south-central areas has much untapped potential that is slowly

being developed as research becomes available. Even in some of the low rain fall areas, Africa has abundant developable water resources from the great African rivers. In Mali, for example, more than a million acres are inundated each year in the flood season, but only about 15 percent is now intensively cropped. Fifty percent or more could be. With water control, yields of rice, sugarcane, millet, sorghum and vegetables could be as high as anywhere in the world.

Perhaps most important, in many of the African nations, governments that care about their citizen's welfare are in power. In spite of continuing political instability, government is improving in ability, in knowledge of practical constraints and opportunities and in a desire for real social and economic progress. And, most African governments have recently mounted specific long-term campaigns to achieve a high degree of food self-sufficiency.

International technical and financial assistance to Africa has been growing rapidly in the last decade with a major emphasis on agriculture. Fertilizers, improved seeds, and small or intermediate but modern farm implements have been introduced and are spreading rapidly. Fertilizer consumption increased by 10 percent a year between 1950 and 1975. High-yielding wheats in Tunisia increased from 800 hectares in

1968 to 225,000 hectares in 1976. Similar programs are at work in other countries.

Irrigation works, roads, centralized commodity storage, communication systems and other infrastructure are being developed. Education is increasingly available. Research is beginning for both food and export crops. There are attempts to remove human and livestock disease constraints to open up potentially highly productive new agricultural areas.

People in rural areas are now well aware of and are actively seeking to participate in the market economy. They have agricultural goods for sale, much of it grain, and could produce much more should appropriate market incentives (prices) develop. Rural people now see a possibility to improve their lives that was never there before.

A dramatic take-off in African Agriculture is possible if current national and international assistance efforts are maintained and strengthened. African grain production will increasingly meet internal consumption needs. Commercial imports will be limited in the short run by the lack of foreign exchange earnings capacity in most African states and by intra-African trade; in the long run by the development of Africa's own production capacity which could well place the continent in a competitive grain export role by the year 2000.

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