

Opinion



A Kansas Viewpoint

Make it fit the bill

From The Hutchinson News

Debate over U.S. farm policy seems to be heating up, and it could mean a curtailment of subsidies when the next farm bill finally is assembled this year.

While we are in the middle of farm country, we don't think that reigning in subsidies would be bad medicine, especially if it limits the big checks that go to the big producers. The current farm bill is not effective. It is, in a word, a mess.

Two prominent farm-state leaders last week came out in favor of dramatic change in farm subsidies. Former Senate leaders Bob Dole of Kansas and Tom Daschle, a Democrat from South Dakota, proposed eliminating direct payments to farmers while retaining a subsidy that is triggered only when market prices are low.

That sounds like a good compromise, but it will face opposition from lawmakers including Sen. Pat Roberts of Kansas.

... The current farm bill, crafted in 2002, expires next year.

The problems with the current policy are many, but chief among them is that it rewards not the small farmer but big farmers. It also depresses, not raises, market prices, and encourages consolidation in the agriculture industry.

Those effects make it sound like farm policy is anticompetitive. By nature, any kind of subsidy is going to be anti-market. But current policy seems extreme.

... We agree most with Reno County farmer Jim French, who wrote in a Thursday column on this page that subsidies should be "decoupled from production." French, who is the Midwestern representative for the global organization Oxfam, argues that subsidized and overproduced U.S. grain crops create hardships in developing countries that rely chiefly on agriculture and cannot afford to subsidize their primitive farming industries.

... Farmers do need a safety net because farming is a volatile business. But we need to be supporting farmers who truly need the support. The current farm bill does not do that.

Subsidies probably have to be based to some degree on how much a farmer is planting. But they should be capped in some way.

We need to keep farmers farming. But rewarding consolidation and overproduction does not accomplish that. We need a farm bill that protects vulnerable American farmers and maintains a healthy market for commodities.

Comments to any opinions expressed on this page are encouraged. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. 5th St., Colby, Kan., 67701. Or e-mail jvannostrand@nwkansas.com or pdecker@nwkansas.com. Opinions do not necessarily reflect the *Free Press*.

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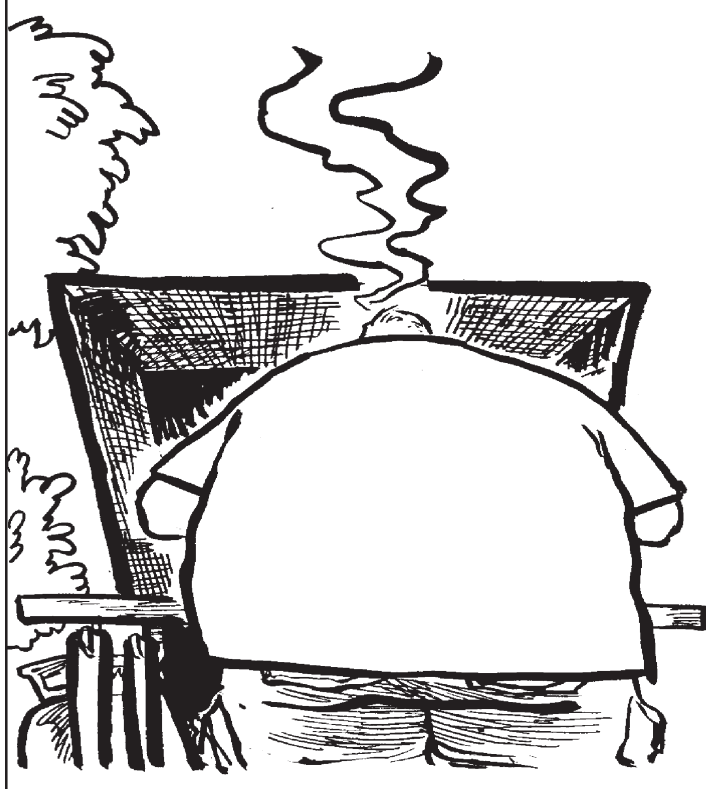
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GRILLING SEASON



All in a day's work

Patty's column a couple of weeks ago about her summer job as a corn detassler reminded me of my own jobs in high school and younger years.

Not only has corn detassling almost become a thing of the past because of developments in corn seed, I asked Patty if she ever "walked beans" during her youth in the Midwest. (That is when you pull weeds in soybean fields — another job forgotten because of technology.)

It's not the job itself I remember most about my first experiences in the working world — but what I learned while doing it. Those moments will never be forgotten.

Late my sophomore year in high school, I got a job at a Burger King — my first real job. My older sister worked there and spoke highly of it.

My first shift on the job was to close the restaurant, supposedly the worst shift of all. Other than the time of day, er, night, you learn to balance when to clean things up and put them away and leave out enough stuff for that person who comes in for a burger seconds before you lock the door.

Every so often, the opposing high school team would stop before their trek home. Even though it was awful feeding the rival football team, there was so much work it went by in a hurry. What helped was the people you worked with.

If you liked working with them and they were good at what they were supposed to do — it made the job fun. (That is why my sister liked it.) That's true today in probably every job.



John Van Nostrand

• Line in the Dust

My most memorable moment at the Burger King had nothing to do with work at all. During a break, I watched some of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in China on the tiny television used for training videos. Cleaning a men's room in a fast-food restaurant in a college town, or working until midnight-30 on summer weekend nights while wearing polyester uniforms, wasn't so bad after all.

Before Burger King, I had a temporary job of cleaning up derailed railroad cars near Big Springs, Neb., about 70 miles from home. Inside the box cars were thousands of cases of canned foods and other items. Some were strewn along the tracks.

We left at the crack of dawn to spend the entire day organizing, repackaging and reloading box cars.

At the end of the day you climb back in your carpool to go home to prepare yourself to do it all over again the next day.

That kind of job, I could tell who really needed

one. But that didn't mean all those people were at the bottom of the barrel. Some people rose to the top.

One guy, who turned out to be our carpool driver, knew my older brother from a college class. The guy, I can't remember his name, was a little nerdy and quirky but had the charisma to attract attention. He was the guy who would say something funny, appropriate, and sometimes needed to make us forget our aching back muscles. All businesses still need somebody like that.

I also learned the best foods can come from odd places. One woman realized she could make a buck from the others by making dozens of burritos and selling them out of her car's trunk during our lunch break. We celebrated our last day by having lunch at a nearby truck stop — but we all missed the burritos.

My senior year in high school, I landed a job at a grocery store, considered one of the elite places to work because the pay was better than others and the store closed at 8 p.m. on week-nights.

I kept that job for about three years. It was too good to quit.

Hopefully today's kids looking for a summer job, or even one year-round, will remember to pay attention to the environment with whatever job they get because that too can have rewards.

— John Van Nostrand is publisher of the Colby Free Press

Your turn

We buy, sell and are played for fools

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In the February 2007 issue of Feedlot magazine, commodity futures trader Ann Barnhardt says in her article: www.feedlotmagazine.com/pdfs/200702.pdf T

reason, Heresy and Sedition — "The beef market is a totally separate market that has little-to-nothing to do with the profitability of cattle producers." In referring to the chuck, ground beef, hide and offal markets, she adds, "Let the packers and retailers worry about those things. Those are their markets, not ours. We sell cattle. We buy cattle. That is the market we should be preoccupied with."

In a recent announcement, U.S.-based Swift and Co., now the third largest beef packer in the U.S., said it was being purchased by Brazil's JBS-Friboi, a merger that would create the world's largest beef packer.

Nearly one-fourth of the U.S. beef processing and distribution capacity will now be owned by a Brazilian company that serves as a direct conduit for cheaper live cattle from South America at the expense of U.S. ranchers getting access to their own market in the highest consuming economy on the globe.

Should cattle producers be concerned about this? Or, as Ms. Barnhardt suggests, should they be satisfied to keep their eyes trained on the latest set of cattle moving through the local sale barn or the numbers on a DTN screen? Heaven forbid they would ask any questions about how this development might impact their livelihood.

This is an old story. Merchants make fortunes by exploiting the ignorance of both buyers and sellers. Impoverished Ethiopian coffee growers are told by the big coffee buyers, www.coffeegeek.com/resources/pressreleases/

— Sara Lee, Kraft, Procter & Gamble, Nestlé and Starbucks, that they have no business trying to brand their superior coffee so they might achieve a higher price.

Coal miners share little in the enormous wealth they bring from the coal mines of Appalachia to energy companies while suffering desperate poverty and deadly working conditions.

Compare the value of diamonds to the well-being of the countries and the mine workers who produce them.

Chicken farmers saw the loss of their markets beginning about 35 years ago. Now the producers of chickens are serfs on their own land while the packers, processors and retailers who have invested far less capital grab an unfair share of what the consumer spends.

We are seeing an increasingly nebulous relationship between the price of a barrel of oil and the price of gas at the pump.

Overall, we have returned to the monopolies and trusts of 100 years ago. Meanwhile, consumers are cushioned from seeing the ramifications on the producers, and we are all still forced to listen to the propaganda of the powerful. Instead, we need to break up these entities if we value our freedom, with legislation that can only succeed when driven by the efforts of many.

Fair, open and competitive markets are critical to the distribution of wealth in any free society. Otherwise, power and wealth becomes concentrated into a few hands, which has proven throughout history to be the greatest threat to widespread economic and social well-being. Markets depend on good information to function properly. Unlike in today's broken and abusive system, what consumers pay for beef should directly affect what cattle producers receive for cattle.

John Tyson also doesn't agree with Ms. Barnhardt. He asked me in 2001 when I was

explaining the IBP anti-trust case to him, "Why don't you sue Wal-Mart? They are the problem, not us. They tell us what they will pay and we have no choice but to buy from you for less" (Quoted from the article www.nobull.net/CattlemenLegal/CLFnews-1-03.html) Economists Spread Meat Packer Propaganda.)

Ms. Barnhardt is right in saying cattlemen need not worry about the price of menudo, ribeyes and kidneys. They should also stop looking for prosperity from the futures markets, which for many years have been manipulated by the big packers to mentally condition cattlemen to take less for their cattle.

In a competitive market, the packers, processors and retailers will determine the value of a finished steer and heifer depending on the prices of the parts. A renewed competitive market from the consumer to the producer will quickly return the approximately \$350 per head that has been stolen from U.S. cattle producers. Cattlemen should fight to increase the number of competitors in the finished cattle market, accept no less than full disclosure of insider deals, complete price reporting and demand fair trade. Then the markets will work.

Before offering advice to cattlemen, Ms. Barnhardt may want to look carefully at chicken farming, processing and distribution. Regrettably, she won't find anything resembling a futures market or cash market for chicken. In addition, she may have to travel to China to see them being processed. What she will find here in the U.S. are farmers, without any other options, feeding and housing the billion-dollar corporation's inventory of birds by virtue of poorly negotiated contracts, worrying about what to do with the manure, and working two or three jobs in town to pay the mortgage on depreciating single-purpose chicken sheds.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

