

As Farming Goes, So Goes the Country

(A Guest Editorial)

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Easy to forget is the fact that farming remains America's largest industry.

Farmers employ more workers, spend more, sell more, own more than any other group. Dwindling in numbers, farmers still get lots of attention. Here's why.

Once again a harvest season is starting with the outlook for reasonably good crops.

There was a time not so long ago when the country watched the harvest for a sign that would show whether the outlook for business would be good or bad. A good harvest meant a prosperous agriculture that, in turn, influenced the course of general business.

Now times have changed. Harvests come and go, getting little more than local attention. Agriculture has come to be regarded as only a minor part of an economy grown vast and varied.

Yet the farming business still is the nation's largest—far more important than any other single industry.

The country's farmers take in around 45 billions a year from the sale of products and from a few other sources. Most of the 45 billions is spent for goods and services—the lion's share going into the smaller communities that are scattered across the country.

Millions of jobs. American farms provide nearly 6.7 million jobs, which is three times the number provided by any other single industry. Farmers spend around 4.5 billions a year for capital equipment—the wide range of farm machinery that makes American agriculture the marvel of the world. This investment is well above the total for any other single industry.

Facts show, in brief, that farming, for all of its troubles, is far from an unimportant part of the nation's economy.

To be more specific, farmers spend more than 9 billion dollars a year for seed, feed and livestock, 1.5 billion for petroleum products and 1.4 billion for fertilizer. The farmer also provides a large market for a variety of goods and services, including lime, pesticides, tools, harness, veterinary services, blacksmithing and irrigation.

Billions in spending. Spending by farm families for their own needs follows closely the pattern of city families. In 1962, for example, farmers spent about 13.4 billion dollars for family needs. About 64 per cent of the total went for food, housing and clothing—about the same proportion that is spent by urban families. Farmers spend a somewhat smaller share of their income than nonfarmers for transportation, tobacco and alcohol, but a larger share for medical and personal care.

Farming, moreover, is the mainstay for the prosperity of numerous small towns in the United States. Of 41 billions in total farm spending, less than 2 billions was spent directly in cities of more than 30,000 people. The largest share of farm spending was done in towns of 5,000 or less.

Farming is estimated to be responsible for about 40 per cent of all jobs in the country. This includes the number of people actually working on farms, plus some 6 million workers who provide the goods and services farmers use. Employment also is large in the network of industries that contribute to the growing, distributing, processing and selling of farm products.

A number of States derive 10 per cent or more of their income from farming. These include North and South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Mississippi, Arkansas, Montana and Idaho.

But fewer farms. Despite the continued importance of agriculture to the country's economy, however, the farming industry has been shrinking in recent years.

The number of farms in the country has dropped from nearly 5 million in 1953 to around 3.5 million now. The farm population, too, has declined—from 19.9 million in 1953 to 13.4 million. As a percentage of total population, the farm population has dropped in 10 years from 12.4 per cent to 7.1 per cent.

Yet American farmers are producing a larger volume of crops and livestock than a decade ago. They are supplying a much larger population with all the food and fiber that is needed. The improved efficiency of American agriculture, in fact, is one of the major reasons for the so-called "farm problem."

Income lags. Increased efficiency has not increased total farm income. Personal income of farmers was 20 billions in 1953, is down to 19.8 bil-

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lions now. Because of the smaller farm population, however, the per capita income on farms has risen. Yet it still lags behind income of nonfarmers.

The importance of farming to the country explains why the need for a flourishing agriculture gets so much attention from Congress and all Government Administrations.

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