President's Address

JOHN L. MERRILL, President, SRM, 1981

THE MOST PRODUCTIVE NATIONS of the world have two characteristics in common—free enterprise and the application of technology, a seemingly unbeatable combination. In the first 200 years of its rather remarkable life, the United States of America was the leading proponent and fulfillment of that recipe for success. In recent years we have seen that leadership erode almost in direct proportion to the degree of departure from these two principles.

It is incomprehensible that there is a relatively small but effective group of people dedicated to moving the U.S. toward central control of our resources and our lives, as opposed to the collective wisdom that results from millions of individual decisions. To the extent that occurs, we follow the example of countries which cannot produce enough food for themselves and which depend on free enterprise systems to provide it. U.S. agriculture provides its citizens the most high quality food for the least portion of their income of any time or place in world history with a great deal left over for export. Despite elaborate five-year government plans for communal agriculture, 40% of Russian food is produced on the 4% of land operated as free enterprise.

We usually equate free enterprise with profit incentive, which certainly is a significant consideration. We must not overlook the equally important loss incentive of free enterprise, which forces improvements in efficiency in a most effective, if not comfortable way. Shakespeare said truly, "Sweet are the uses of adversity. . . ."

FUNDING FOR AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH has been an easy place to cut at both federal and state levels in recent years because no large and vocal opposition is aroused. The result is that in real dollars, investment in agricultural research actuàlly has declined, the pipeline of research data that has allowed us to produce more efficiently has slowed to a trickle, and last year for the first time in history, productivity of U.S. agriculture declined.

Much of the agricultural technology that has been researched and applied has been based on inputs of readily available energy and water at low cost. It is shocking to contemplate how dependent the U.S. has become on surplus grain produced under irrigation as a base for its livestock industry, exports, and balance of payments at a time when both energy and water are increasingly less available and more costly. Tame pastures with high upkeep and low income are being converted into cropland in humid and subhumid areas, while marginal irrigated land is being returned to dryland farming or reseeded in grass.

RANGELANDS, RANGE ANIMALS, and range people all become more important under these circumstances. Rangelands provide the breeding ground for ruminant animals capable of converting forage inedible by man into high quality protein from nonarable land. These ruminants have the flexibility to use more or less grain according to availability and cost, which provides a cushion of stability for crop farmers and for swine and poultry that are dependent on grain to be productive.

If we are who and what we say we are, range people are the practicing ecologists who can lead the way from input agriculture to ecological agriculture based on intimate knowledge and understanding of all components of the ecosystem, careful assessment of land capabilities and limitations, selection of enterprises that are ecologically and economically sound, and use of the combination of practices that will, to the greatest extent possible, substitute knowledge for inputs. I have cited the U.S. as an example, but the principles are clear for all nations.

The range profession has more opportunities and responsibilities than ever before in wisely managing the remarkable range resource for all its multiple uses, in educating ourselves and others to those values, needs, and means of fulfilling them, and in zealously defending the individual freedom and concomitant responsibility to do so. If not us, who? If not now, when?

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