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**Cheaper grains  
on the plains**

BY WILLIAM H. INMAN  
United Press International

DALLAS — Midwestern grain producers face another bleak year of oversupply, tight credit, poor exports and confused government policy, a panel of experts predicts. "Weak export performance in 1983 provides further evidence that growth in agricultural trade in the 1980s may prove disappointing," said Mark Drabenstott, economist with Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City.

"Optimistic expectations that the rapid growth in farm exports during the 1970s would continue still have not materialized," he said. "And without strong export markets, American farmers eventually must come to grips with the chronic problems of oversupply."

No crops will be in greater relative supply than corn and wheat, said Kansas State agronomist William Tierney.

"Winter wheat planted acres could be a record 67 million acres," said Tierney at a recent export trade panel discussion in Manhattan, Kan. "Wheat prices are expected to remain flat for the next few months."

Moreover, wheat export markets look gloomy. "Sales to China are in trouble," he said. "Projected total wheat exports have been lowered by 45 million bushels."

"Favorable crop conditions are reported in Argentina," a major competitor, "and Australia is forecasting a record crop of 735 million bushels."

He said corn production could hit a record 8.5 billion bushels, bouncing back from devastating 1983 losses caused by drought and acreage reduction. Many producers, Tierney predicted, must plant more corn to pay off the huge production debts accrued in 1983.

"Today, we have the capacity in this country to grow, handle, transport, and ship almost twice as much grain as we will export this year," said Robert Kohlmeier, a Cargill marketing executive.

"Even the PIK (federal Payment-In-Kind subsidy program) cannot mask the financial impact of this overcapacity on producer and exporter alike."

Kohlmeier said the nation's traditional trading partners cannot pick up the slack, and new export markets should be carved from developing countries where food needs are most urgent.

"It does seem clear that population in developing countries will continue to grow at a rapid clip, far exceeding the industrialized world, and population growth translates into consumers and growing food needs," Kohlmeier said.

He suggested that the government should extend new credit loans to key export nations, and not hold them to outdated contracts that will stunt their long-term buying power.

In particular, he said, loan credits should be issued to Mexico and eastern European countries.

But agricultural credit loans will not get a sympathetic hearing in budget-tight Congress, said Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan.

Newspaper articles recently suggested, he said, "that the best and simplest solution" to farmer woes would be to eliminate all government intervention. "I can't tell you that this view predominates on Capitol Hill," he said, "but it is spreading rapidly."

"The damage has already been done in terms of adverse publicity for U.S. agriculture," Dole said. "Those of use who believe that farm programs serve a worthwhile purpose will have our hands full, and tied, when the farm bill comes up for reauthorization in 1985."

Nevertheless, Dole said, it is time to reassess the value of federal farm subsidies.

"Federal spending for farm programs, foreign as well as domestic, has gotten out of control," he said. "With the crisis over deficits projected through this decade, any increase in export program funding will have to be accompanied by at least an equivalent spending reduction in domestic farm programs."

The Federal Reserve's Drabenstott said the volume of farm exports has been in a three-year slump and the strength of the American dollar makes future growth difficult.

But Ivan Wyatt, president of the Kansas Farmers Union, said the government must concentrate on increasing prices to farmers, not increasing credit or export volume.

Agri-business and many agriculture support industries profit from volume of production and volume sales with little regard to price, Wyatt said, adding that, the farmer "lives or dies on price," he said.

"It's stupid for the U.S. and for the nations of the free world to continue to subsidize the economies of the Communist bloc nations with cheap grain sales, while we bankrupt our farmers, transferring that farmer's earnings from him to the Russian economy," he said.

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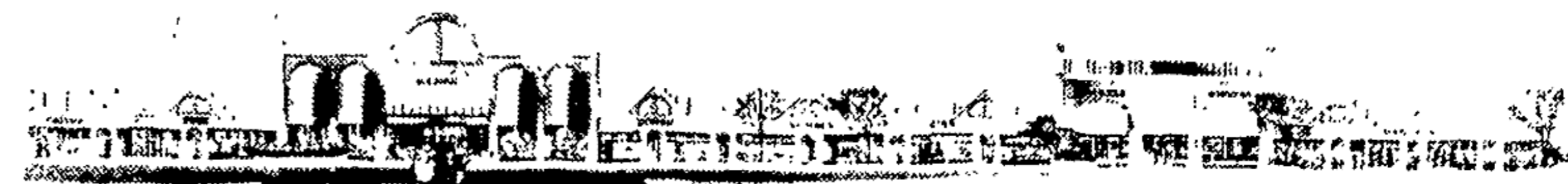


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