

30 Years Later, USDA Trims Fat

By Ferdie J. Deering

A little over 30 years ago, when I was appointed editor of *The Farmer-Stockman* magazine, it occurred to me that I should become well acquainted with the United States Department of Agriculture.

Started as a modest government bureau in 1862, the USDA had gradually expanded as agriculture spread westward. Then during the New Deal days, it had blossomed into a mammoth bureaucracy.

I soon found the task of comprehending its multiple purposes and overlapping functions was beyond me. Farmers and ranchers were in a worse predicament. They had to run their businesses according to rules, regulations, advice, supervision and money dispensed by several branch agencies in each of the nation's 3,074 counties.

We published a series of articles about this federal "monster for doing good" in *The Farmer-Stockman*. Then Savoie Lottinville, director of the University of Oklahoma Press, now retired, suggested that it might be a suitable subject for a book.

Eventually the book was written and published under the title "USDA, Manager of American Agriculture". It stirred up a lot of talk but not much simplification of USDA, which was the main theme. After the war, it was translated and published in Frankfurt, Germany, but it didn't sell very well there, either.

Among its recommendations was the idea that various USDA agencies should be organized to function as a team. Local personnel sometimes seemed to be more competitive than co-operative as they vied for farm families as "clients".

Harold Hunter, Oklahoma executive director of



the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), Stillwater, told me that the book was quoted by Joe Wright, assistant secretary of agriculture for administration, in a recent national conference at Temple, Texas, where an edict was issued for consolidation of USDA field offices for greater efficiency and improved services.

It calls for combining 1,800 local offices of ASCS, Soil Conservation Service, Farmers Home Administration, and Federal Crop Insurance Corp. into unified offices, with personnel and equipment pooled un-

der a single county administrator.

The Agricultural Extension Service (county agent) is not included in the directive. Neither are Production Credit Associations, which were started with government money but which have been amortized and are now owned by patrons.

It is expected that the unified set-up will deliver all Rural Development Program industrialization, housing, water and sewer services for both farm and rural non-farm families.

Oklahoma now has 77 ASCS offices, 69 FHA offices, 91 SCS offices and five FCIC offices, a total of 242. Hunter is executive director of ASCS, Ludwig W. Johnson is state director of FHA, and Hampton Burns is state conservationist for SCS.

Hunter said that in 49 counties the affected agencies are already housed under one roof, 63 per cent of the counties, compare to 54 per cent nationally. Others will be gradually moved together.

So, at last, we are heading toward a simplified, more efficient USDA, after

about 60 per cent of the farmers have moved to town. Secretary of Agriculture Earl B. Butz said at the Temple meeting:

"We've asked farmers to use new farm programs and go all out in food production next year, so we in government have a concurrent responsibility to go all out to give farmers the most efficient and streamlined service in the field that's possible."

That book, written back in the 1940s, criticized artificial subsidized foundations for farm prices and the practice of building more and bigger agencies to handle farm problems. It is encouraging to see agriculture moving away from artificial pricing and agency multiplication toward solid domestic and foreign markets.

As suggested in the book, "The plain truth is that the American farmer can be efficient enough to produce in competition with any of these countries, and when we realize that and open the way to free trade among nations that buy our commodities, we will be on the road to sound agriculture."

Business

Oil • Finance • Agribusiness • Homes • Real Estate

December 23, 1973 7
Section B

THE SUNDAY OKLAHOMAN