

Politicians Ready to 'Save' Farm

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Politicians are getting ready to "save the family farms" again. They never have, of course, but it makes good political talk.

The number of farms has been declining for half a century and most of those which disappeared were family farms. Trouble was, the families couldn't make a living on them. A number of observers believe that federal programs have accelerated the demise of such farms.

Latest speculation is that a new plan to "save family farmers" will be proposed by the Carter administration after the 1980 elections, if not before. It is expected to consist of "income supplements" for small family farmers in need. Government investigators would certify those whose income is below specified levels.

The selling point would be to cut larger farms (which presumably are not family farms) from most government aid. They would still be able to get loans and price supports, or disaster assistance.

The tricky part of the proposal will be to define a "family farm." When politicians, economists or farmers speak of family farms there is a good chance that they aren't talking about the same things.

This came out clearly as anything in the "Structure of Agriculture" hearings held a few months ago by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a prelude

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to drafting of farm programs due in 1981.

Look at some of the definitions mentioned in these hearings.

In North Carolina, a speaker said a family farm is "simply a farm owned and operated by a family." Another said a family farm is an operation that "requires about 900 worker-days a year, with one-half the labor provided by family members and the management provided by a family member." These definitions allow considerable latitude.

In Alabama hearings, a definition offered

said "a family farm is an operation in which the operator is a full-time farmer and the major portion of his family's income is from the farming operation."

Another spokesman said "The size of a family farm is that amount of land that one man or his family can manage." Conceivably, this might range from 40 acres to 40,000 acres.

Three persons at the hearing in Des Moines suggested that "a farm is not a family farm without hogs." Another speaker proposed that family farms be defined as those with net incomes no higher than the national median income for all families.

At Wichita Falls, several witnesses discussed farm size. Some felt that larger operations were both inevitable and more efficient.

Others said the small farm is a better model and should be encouraged. Another claims small farms produce more cheaply than larger units.

At Denver, a speaker declared that a definition of a family farm is "almost unattainable" but would not object to any argument "which categorizes large as being bad and small as being good."

At Spokane, Wash., it was noted that "what looks big to one person may seem small to another." Participants defined a family farm as a place without a hired foreman or manager, a place with no outside investment, a business where the family makes the decisions and gets most of its income from farming, and a "family-owned and operated farm, without regard to size or the number of employees."

In Indiana, witness opinions ranged from

"big is not the best" to "small farms lose money."

The Census definition of a farm is a place which sells \$1,000 or more worth of products within a year. This takes in all shapes and sizes of rural tracts, including great numbers of homes where non-farm income is the primary means of livelihood.

According to the USDA publication "Farm-line," there is a vast difference in per-farm net income. In 1978, this ranged from \$56,706 in Arizona,

where there are relatively few, large, irrigated farms, to \$811 in West Virginia, where small, part-time farmers predominate.

Your definition of a family farm might be as good as any, but the one adopted in Washington, if this plan is enacted, would determine who gets a slice of the "income supplement" and how big.