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Misleading Estimates Cause Trouble

IF an estimate is repeated often enough and loudly enough it may become accepted as statistical truth.

Like the automobile mechanic whose sign declared "We do precision guesswork," economics offer approximations based upon incomplete information. If sample surveys or tests contain errors in direction, the mistakes grow in proportion to extrapolations made.

In a condensation of the book, "The Ultimate Resource" by Julian L. Simon, University of Illinois economics professor, the March Readers Digest presents "The Case Against Doomsday." Simon says:

"Since the beginning of recorded time, the standard of living has risen along with the population. There is no convincing reason why this trend toward a better life cannot continue indefinitely."

Simon also takes after grim forecasts of global food shortages. He admits that famines occur but not because of worldwide lack of food. "American farmers, who fed two

percent of the rest of the world's people in 1950, will soon feed 15 percent," the author says.

American farmers are being asked to cut back on grain production because we can't get all we produce through to hungry people.

"What prevents some countries from making more progress than they have (toward increasing their own food production) is not the unavailability of technology, but cultural resistance to it, most notably in Africa," Simon writes. "Yet that, too, can change."

Another widespread belief, the concept that the United States is losing three million acres of agricultural land annually to urbanization, is challenged by the American Farm Bureau Federation.

AFBF spokesman, Shep Quate, environmental resources specialist, points out that these acreage estimates were based upon the 1977 national resource inventory made by the Soil Conservation Service. He calls the estimate "pure propaganda to try and support the weak argu-

ment that the United States is losing food production capacity."

Using a different set of figures, Quate shows that the urban and built-up areas cited in the survey came from the total non-federal land base and not just from agricultural lands. The proportion of agricultural land lost is much less than the estimates.

"If 675,000 acres were converted each year for the next 20 years that would amount to only 13.3 million acres, which is less than two percent of the potential base of 538 million acres," Quate observes, adding that "The propagandists have done their work exceptionally well and the American public believes this is a true figure."

A section of the 1981 farm bill states its purpose is to "minimize the extent to which federal programs contribute to the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmlands to non-agricultural uses." Quate says it is estimated that federal programs have caused 60 percent of the conversion of farmland to other uses.