The Challenge to Agriculture
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We farmers get a lot of credit for feeding the world, helping our economy, and serving as the stewards of our land, but we should all remind ourselves once in a while that our great success was made possible because of the work that you have devoted your lives to. I personally would like to say thank you. I know your work has made a difference in my farming operation.

They tell the story about Oliver Wendell Holmes, in which the distinguished U.S. Supreme Court jurist was riding on a train and couldn't find his ticket. The conductor told him not to worry, he could send it when he found it. Holmes looked at the conductor with some irritation and said, “The problem is not where my ticket is. The problem is where am I going?”

It seems to me we in agriculture find ourselves in the same situation. Because of the different challenges facing us, we also are asking ourselves “where are we going?” How are we going to produce enough food and fiber for a growing world population that maintains, if not enhances, our natural resources, while at the same time allowing farmers and ranchers to be competitive in a world market?

Today I would like to share my perspective on this challenge and suggest how I believe we can address it. American agriculture is the envy of the world. Due in great part to your contributions, our agriculture system can support a bumper crop of people; we live longer than ever before, and our quality of life continues to improve. But at this point in our history, the nation’s environmental agenda has moved from urbanized America to our farms.

Our agricultural production practices that have helped to make this nation strong are being questioned. There’s a growing perception that if we continue our present methods of farming we would surely have an ecological disaster.

This comes as a shock to the agricultural community. Farmers and ranchers have always taken pride in being conscientious stewards of the land. It never occurred to us that someone would label us as the “villains” in ecosystem management or call us “rapists of the land.”

Just last week syndicated columnist Warren T. Brookes wrote an editorial about the television promotional and advertising spots being seen on California TV for passage of “Big Green” Proposition 128. These programs are part of a series of TV and movie stars delivering frightening messages about environmental doom. The programming begins with the message that we must support our natural resources or face disaster.

The final message in the program comes from the great ecologist who wrote an editorial about the television promotional and advertising spots being seen on California TV for passage of “Big Green” Proposition 128. These programs will be called on to produce as much food as it has produced in the entire 12,000-year history of agriculture. It seems to me we in agriculture find ourselves in the same situation. Because of the different challenges facing us, we also are asking ourselves “where are we going?” How are we going to produce enough food and fiber for a growing world population that maintains, if not enhances, our natural resources, while at the same time allowing farmers and ranchers to be competitive in a world market?

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In our worthy pursuit to feed the people, we have perfected science to allow us to increase output per acre rather than cultivate more acres. Crop scientists and agronomists, have contributed significantly to this great achievement. It has made us the envy of the world, but it has not come without some environmental costs. History teaches us some powerful lessons.

The great civilizations located near the Fertile Crescent in the Mideast were once covered with productive forests and grasslands. With each generation, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers became filled with silt from deforestation, overgrazing, and soil erosion.

The situation eventually became untenable, and much of this once-productive land has turned into barren desert—desert that today isβ Iraq—the temporary home of our young men and women in our armed services. It is our responsibility to make certain that this environmental history does not repeat itself here or any place else.

WORLD POPULATION TREND HISTORY AND THE HOTSPOTS

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Former Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman expressed a sobering prospect that we are facing, “In the next two to four generations, world agriculture will have to produce as much food as it has produced in the entire 12,000-year history of agriculture.”

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