
The excerpt illustrates the debate over agricultural policies at the height of the Great Depression. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 had been created as part of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal program. Its purpose was to help farmers by reducing the production of staple crops, thus raising farm prices and encouraging more diversified farming. The government offered payments to farmers in return for limiting the acreage they allotted to staple crops. In the cases of cotton and tobacco, the government imposed taxes that forced farmers to reduce the amounts that they marketed. In 1936 the Supreme Court declared important sections of the act to be invalid, but Congress promptly adopted the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, which encouraged conservation by paying benefits to farmers for planting soil-building crops instead of staple crops.

The AAA and Soil Conservation—A Program of Compulsory Reglementation

The Agricultural Adjustment Act was adopted as a means of raising farm prices to pre-war “parity.” Pre-war parity may be defined as a price which will enable the farmer to exchange a unit of a commodity which he sells, such as a bushel of wheat, a hundred-weight of hogs or a pound of cotton, for as much of the things which he buys as he could during the prewar period 1909–1914.

The method, as originally devised, was that of reducing the production of those commodities which were on an export basis, and which had what were considered to be price depressing surpluses. The program was intended to be wholly voluntary from the standpoint of participation by farmers. The President in his speech at Topeka on September 14, 1932, said, “The farm plan must not be coercive. It must be voluntary, and the individual producer should at all times have the opportunity of non-participation if he so desires....”

But is soon became apparent that voluntary participation would not produce the desired unity of action among farmers. Compulsory reglementation began. The Bankhead Cotton Act and the Kerr Tobacco Act practically forced growers to reduce production to specified allotments by placing a prohibitive marketing tax upon the sale of cotton and tobacco in excess of quotas established under the provision of these acts. In addition to the tax, both acts provided heavy penalties for their violation.

The Potato Act of 1935 was molded along similar lines, but it went so far as to hold buyers liable for the purchase of potatoes not sold in conformity with the provisions of the Act. To an increasing extent the AAA became compulsory. To an increasing extent the American farmer lost control of the management of his farm....

Rental and Benefit Payments

The great bulk of the money received by farmers was in the form of rental and benefit
payments. Through March 31, 1936, these amounted to $1,135,929,072—an average of $167.00 per farm in the United States. During the same period the national debt increased by $373.00 per family in the United States. But not all farmers were equally favored in the distribution of government checks. In round numbers, only about one-half the farmers received payments. Eighty-eight per cent of the entire amount went to the producers of cotton, wheat, corn, hogs, and tobacco. Little or nothing went to the cattle raiser, the dairyman, the poultryman, the wool, fruit, and vegetable growers. This is significant when one considers that the annual value of dairy products alone is three times as great as cotton, corn and wheat combined.

More significant than the reduction of production is the shifts in production from one region to another. A comparison of wheat production in 1934 and 1929 as reported by the census shows that the acres of wheat harvested increased during this five-year period in the New England, East North Central, South Atlantic and East South Central States. These increases are the more important due to the fact that wheat acreage harvested in the United States as a whole was one-third less in 1934 than it was in 1929. The year 1934 was the worst drought year in history. That year was also the one of greatest reductions under the A. A. A. Yet in the face of these deterrents, wheat production increased in most of the less specialized wheat growing regions, to the detriment of the farmer whose normal crop is wheat. Corn acreage harvested increased in 1934 over 1929 in the New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, South Atlantic, and East South Central States.

It is clear that the paying of farmers to quit growing certain products encourages their growing other products. The result is not so much a reduction in the total farm production as it is in a shift of production from established to non-established regions. To pay a farmer to quit growing wheat, cotton, corn and tobacco is to pay him to grow more hay and more grass. More hay and more grass means more milk, beef and mutton. Reduction of certain crops at the expense of increasing others threatens to shift distress among farmers; not eliminate it.

Soil conservation is a national and non-political problem. It is of universal import. The city dweller, as well as the farmer, is interested in defending our natural resources against waste and depletion. The soil is one of the most important of these. The dust bowls of the West, the flood devastation of the East, and the ever encroaching gulleys of the South, together with the loss of fertility over wide areas, are outstanding reminders of the pressing need for corrective action. Effective action will differ markedly according to regions, and in keeping with the causes. Soil conservation on neighboring farms may call for treatment wholly unlike. It cannot be handled by a blanket formula.

The preserving of our soil resources for future generations is a long-time program. It will continue to be with us always. It should not be burdened with the temporary expedient of farm relief. It should not be made an emergency vehicle for carrying checks to farmers just before election. Its importance to the nation as a whole, demands that it not be submerged in the interests of a class, or made a political tool.

Basically, the farm relief portion of the program is designed to increase farm purchasing
power. Farm purchasing power is intimately related to prices of farm products. Soil conservation practices by farmers are not likely to exert an immediate influence upon farm prices. Their long-time tendency will be to shift agricultural production from certain crops to others, and to shift the production of specified crops from one region to another. But its influence as a price booster is not likely to be either great or rapid. Prices of agricultural products are dependent, in no small measure, upon such things as consumer purchasing power, which is closely associated with unemployment, which, in turn, is inseparably connected with industrial prosperity. These are matters beyond the farmers’ control.

Document Analysis

In your opinion, does this document call for more or less government involvement in agriculture?

In your opinion, what good can be achieved by limiting farm production? Is this a sound policy? Why or why not?

According to this document, which farmers received most of the benefits under the act?

Which farmers received the fewest benefits?