The Fuel/Food Connection

There are no lines at the gas pumps; we seem willing and able to pay twice the price for gasoline; recreation vehicles are selling again; and energy legislation has been swayed by political considerations as much as by concerns for the national interest. These are not indications that the energy problem has gone away or that it has been solved by some marvelous new technology. They are indications that the extent of the problem has not yet been generally realized.

Last year the National Research Council issued a report on oil and gas reserves. According to their figures, these two sources, which furnish three quarters of the energy we now use, will last only eighteen years at current consumption rates assuming all the reserves are found and developed. There are less pessimistic estimates, but there are enough responsible studies — including one by the National Academy of Sciences — which suggest that this situation will come to a head by or soon after the year two thousand.

There are new technologies on the horizon and alternative sources already developed. But none of them is expected to fuel our cars and trucks in the near future, production could be significantly reduced. A delay in planting or irrigation, a failure to fertilize, dry, refrigerate, or transport could affect yield or cause the loss of a crop.

Those who determine energy allocation priorities will probably assign high priorities to agricultural production — but that is addressing only part of the problem. Unless the energy needs throughout the system are recognized and provided for, our food supply will be jeopardized as the energy problem becomes more critical. In a society largely unaware of how the food it depends upon is produced, it is time for the agricultural community to devise plans and programs to get the fuel/food message across to policy-makers and the consuming public. If future essential needs are to be met, national planning must be instituted soon.