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Confrontation at the CASH REGISTER

THE GUT ISSUE of agriculture is always the price of food. There were riots over food prices in ancient Rome, and Cleopatra's subjects complained bitterly about the cost of bread. In this modern day the same issue is with us and it is critically, and emotionally, reviewed daily in countless confrontations at cash registers in food markets throughout the country.

When bargain prices prevail, there is a cordial atmosphere at the check-out counter, although gloom may prevail back at the farm or packing house. On the other hand in these days of skyrocketing food prices, growers are smiling but there is angry clamor at the cash register. The noise is so loud that it is being heard all the way to the White House and Capitol Hill. Our political leaders are responding in the form of token price controls and by setting the wheels in motion to reduce public spending on price supports and production limitations. The aim is to roll back prices by increasing the supply.

These measures will surely have some of the desired effect; however, such manipulations look only at immediate relationships and do not recognize all of the underlying causes. A critical need is to increase the efficiency of the food production and distribution system. The way to do this is by research. We need to develop better plants and animals, better methods of managing them, and better ways of processing and distributing the products derived from them. If we can produce cheaper we can eat cheaper, and hopefully both the producer and consumer can benefit.

Our agricultural scientists have demonstrated time and again their ability to discover efficient ways of doing things and there is no evidence that their ability has become less than it has been in the

past nor that the opportunity to make useful discoveries has diminished. Indeed many scientists believe that we have but mined the surface of scientific agriculture and that the mother lode of discovery still lies underneath and is available only for the digging.

For example, about one out of every four of the consumers' food dollars is wasted in the form of losses to plant and animal diseases, losses to insects, weeds and other pests, and losses by spoilage in shipping and handling. This is a staggering waste of the bounty of our land and of the producers' resources and the consumers' money. I am in no way convinced that waste on such a scale is part of the inevitable scheme of things. I am confident that further research can eliminate most of these losses.

There is a great potential for enhanced efficiency through the genetic improvement of our crops and livestock and for the development of new crops and the adaptation of old ones to new situations. The potential for improved husbandry is great and the prospect for reducing the costs of processing and distributing food is ever greater. When the cost of a tomato increases tenfold from the farmer's field to the consumer's table, common sense tells us that we ought to put our minds to finding a better way.

These are serious problems and it is clear that public outrage will not solve them and it is equally clear that an expanded research effort could help a great deal. The strange thing is that at this particular time the budget now before Congress proposes a major cut in funds for agricultural research. I cannot think of an act that, over the long term, could be better calculated to increase the real cost of food both to the producer and the consumer.