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THE PERFECTIVE SOCIETY

That part of the American temper that demands "instant" reform and "instant" solutions has its advantages and its drawbacks. Without question, action and reform are needed on many fronts, but the difficulty is that, in our complex interdependent world, our various "fronts" are so intricately related to one another that the impact of any major change is felt throughout the total system. When a change begins to affect adversely the interests and objectives of other sectors of society, it is time to look at benefits and price tags.

One of the changes that is having an impact on our social-economic-political fabric is the massive increase in government rule-making, monitoring and enforcement for a wide range of human activities from hiring practices to packaging. Regulatory activities concerned with the environment, for example, affect land use, building construction, industrial production, motor vehicle operation and equipment, energy production and consumption to name a few.

However one feels philosophical about this recent upsurge in government intervention, we have to recognize the fact that there are economic consequences. It increases the cost of government and the size of the tax bill for all of us; it adds to the prices we pay for products and services, and most important, it adds to the cost and to the difficulties of producing goods and services essential to society.

If we could legislate a pristine environment and a world of absolute safety for the worker, the consumer, and all endangered species at no cost, there would be no problem. But in the real world of population growth, diminishing energy supplies, economic stresses and unemployment, we do have the problem of reconciling conflicting

needs and objectives. For example we have to balance the economic need for adequate energy against the environmental and safety factors involved in building a nuclear power plant.

In the agricultural sector, there is mounting evidence and agreement that government regulating activities are, in many instances, in conflict with the interests of both the consumer and the farmer. Few would quarrel with the basic tenets of the Environmental Protection Act, and farmers particularly depend on clean water and uncontaminated air and soil. But when seemingly inflexible application of EPA regulations are combined with often conflicting and overlapping demands by numerous additional agencies in matters of public health, water quality, air pollution, pesticides, taxes, zoning, and labor standards, the farmer finds himself in an impossible situation.

Today's farmers are faced with a real dilemma. Complying with existing and proposed regulations requires significant new capital investments which may prove to be inadequate before the dust settles around all regulations. It seems obvious that food costs must inevitably increase to compensate for the rising costs of developing a perfective society.

I am not suggesting that it is a time for "benign neglect" and abandonment of standards and regulations. I am suggesting that in our haste to legislate we have achieved regulatory overkill and that it is time for a hard look at the economic and social consequences.

If we approach our problems without expectations of instant or perfect solutions we can develop a rational body of consistent and coordinated regulations more in tune with economic realities.