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# 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, some present environmental complications, most of them will be limited in application, and the costs will be high. And all of this has implications for agriculture — implications that can affect every citizen.

Advocates of the “no-growth” concept notwithstanding, there is an irreducible, inevitable need for reasonable growth in food production as long as there is growth in the number of people to be fed. And despite some of our critics, we can-

not turn back the clock on the highly-developed, energy-intensive system of modern agriculture which enabled American farmers to match output with growing needs up to this point.

Energy has become an integral element in our modern food system. The amount of energy used is modest in relation to total energy consumption, but it is indispensable to the functioning of that system.

The availability of energy affects our entire economy; but for the food industry, which supplies our most basic need, it is particularly crucial. The food system is a complex, inter-related sequence of energy-using activities, from planting through processing and distribution. If the energy supply is restricted or unavailable at any point in the chain or at a certain time during the year, 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.