

# Subsidies keep 'em down on the farm

**T**oronto's smug but deep down insecure bourgeoisie like to think of their city — and themselves — as the cat's pyjamas.

Not surprisingly, the economic summit has got the town's good burghers in a tizzy of excitement. They will now have the chance to show off before the massed foreign press corps which, short on hard summit news, will ooh and aah over Toronto's many civic virtues.

Yet I doubt there are more than a handful of people here who really understand what the rich nations' summit is all about — or that its participants are facing a most scary problem that is sweeping down like a giant economic tidal wave.

The problem is agriculture — too much agriculture. We have reached the point where the noble husbandmen of North America, Europe and Japan are almost as great a threat to western security and stability as Comrade Gorbachev's tank armies.

Simply put, the West and Japan have at least five times too many overproducing farmers who can't support themselves. Farmers, who are no rubes, have learned to herd politicians even more adeptly than their Holsteins. Crack! go the farmer's whips — and out pop farm subsidies of dizzying complexity and infinite variety. While city slickers fork over half of their incomes to the government, the tillers of the earth get almost 50% of their incomes from the taxpayers.

Treasuries from Ottawa to Tokyo are being bled white to keep farmers overproducing.

Last year alone, the U.S. subsidized its farmers to the tune of \$40 billion. The Common Market ladled out a whopping \$46.3 billion to its farmers. Japan spent \$25.2 billion so that its rich farmers could grow designer rice on paddies that cost nearly as much as New York real



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estate. The way to keep 'em down on the farm, it seems, is to fork out \$111.5 billion each year.

Imagine that if just half of one year's farm subsidies was spent by NATO on armored divisions and fighters, the threat of Soviet tank armies reaching the English Channel in 13 days would be eliminated — and with it the danger of nuclear war in Europe.

But no. Our timid governments continue to finance mountains of butter, eggs, wheat or skim milk, and shimmering seas of wine. And worse is on the way.

These staggering surpluses are partly the result of massive overuse of agricultural chemicals. Our environment and food chain have become saturated with cancer-causing pesticides, antibiotics and chemical fertilizers. Now, thanks to genetic engineering, animal and plant hybrids are appearing that will increase output. Mountains of surpluses will turn into Himalayas.

And there's even more bad news. We are so used to hearing about starving Ethiopians that few of us are aware that a major agricultural revolution has been under way in the Third World — and perhaps even the Soviet Union. Properly managed, Africa's existing farmland could feed the entire continent and half of Europe. Within the coming decade, once the cycle of drought and

war abates, Africa will come close to feeding its people. India, formerly a leading food importer, is now self-sufficient and may soon compete with western farmers for Third World markets.

During my recent trip to the Soviet Union, I heard a remarkable story. A free-enterprise farming co-op in Siberia had actually managed to sell a shipload of wheat to Australia. Thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms the co-op could undersell the Aussies, who normally ship wheat to Russia. If the Soviets ever get their agricultural act together, their need for imports will dry up — and they might even begin exporting, as Russia did during czarist days.

A few markets will remain, such as China, darkest Africa and the chronically food-short Mideast. But most of today's western food export markets will probably vanish. Without them, our farm crisis will quickly move into the red zone of disaster.

What's to be done? Clearly, farm subsidies must be cut to zero over the next decade. Many farmers will have to move into town and find new work — just like candlestick and buggy whip makers. Pesticides, growth hormones, bionic beef and antibiotics should be immediately banned. Maybe we should pay each farmer \$50,000 not to work — to stop exhausting and polluting the land and producing food in the middle of a growing worldwide food glut.

Knowing what to do is easy. Taking the required political steps is terrifying. Farm lobbies have rings in politicians' noses. The only way to break this destructive grip and prevent mushrooming farm subsidies from bankrupting our democracies is for the leaders to link arms, exit the summit hall, yell "No more subsidies" and then run like hell.