The eternal bind Farmers fight cost squeeze

By RANDY GREEN

Almost everyone now knows that agriculture is a business. The question is who the businessmen will be. They won't be the farmers who went

out of business last year. Or the ones

who, unable to make ends meet by tilling the soil, will quit farming this year.

Farmers and ranchers are in a costprice squeeze. That in itself is nothing new. The cost of everything from fertilizer to machinery to (increasingly) money has been going up for some time; com-modity prices haven't even pretended to

But for many agricultural producers, things have simply gotten worse and worse. This year, predict the experts, might just be the worst income year for farmers since the granddaddy of them

The government is trying to get producers of major crops to produce less: to refrain from cultivating some of their acreage in the hope that a smaller supply will raise prices. Maybe that will help, a

But it says something about American agriculture that farmers, in order to safe-

produce less food, not more.

The American farmer is a victim of his own success. His productivity is unparalleled in the history of ... well, just about anything, anywhere. One U.S. farmer produces enough food to feed himself and roughly 60 other people.

That's incredible.
Think about it: Most of man's history has been a long and fitful struggle to survive. The fight for enough food to eat was so all-consuming, such an uphill battle, that the vast majority of people in most societies have had to till the soil not to raise a crop for sale, but just to feed

Most people, in other words, farmed by necessity, not choice.

The industrial revolution and its aftermath changed that, and America's far-mers and ranchers took full advantage of it. They produced, and produced, and produced. America has not known famines; it has known surpluses.

And therein lies the irony.

Our food producers harvest a bounty unprecedented in history. We export more food than any other country in the world. Americans, for all their complaining about high food prices, turn out to spend 16 percent of their income on food — less than virtually any other people on earth. This country's main "nutrition problem" is overeating. Whatever advantages the Soviets have over us in the grand scheme of things, our superiority in agriculture is unquestioned and unquestionable.

And our farmers are going broke. Not all of them, to be sure, not by a long shot. But it is happening. A veteran farm broadcaster recently showed a visi-tor a thick stack of neatly printed fliers announcing auction after auction of farm equipment and supplies, all from the operations of families who just couldn't afford to farm anymore.

Those auctions speak far louder than any government statistics.

Bad management may have done in some of those farmers, but the majority are more sinned against than sinning. They are good businessmen. They work hard, manage their money wisely and keep up with new techniques and technology. But they're up to their ears in debt, and the price they get for their wheat or their cattle won't even pay their

cost of production, much less make them

a profit.
All right, so that's a very sad story. & what?

Well, comes one answer, if we don'to something soon, the family farm will be gone and corporate agriculture will take over. Our food won't be produced by said independent farmers with deep ties to the land and rural life, but by hug. monopolistic corporations.

That, of course, is the extreme state ment of the case. The vast majority of a will ender of leader of farms in this country are still owned by individual operators. A great many of them are by no means "small farms," course; but 2,000 acres can be famili-owned just as much as 200. And histori-ally, "corporate" agriculture per se has to been too successful, except in a few fairh specialized areas.

In other words, the question is whether small farms are losing more and will soon become factories in the fields. The question isn't whether it pass small farmers to farm.

No, the question is whether it put anybody to farm.

And that's what makes the current sis — it is unrealistic to call it anything else — so very disturbing.

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