

Inflation rates in 1983 best since Nixon's term

United Press International

WASHINGTON — Consumer prices rose 0.3 percent in December and just 3.8 percent in all of 1983, the best inflation rate since Nixon administration price controls more than a decade ago, the government said Tuesday.

Only used cars and tobacco showed annual inflation of 10 percent or more last year, a sharp contrast from 1979 when the rate for everything soared to 13.3 percent.

Energy prices dropped 0.5 percent last year, the biggest decline in that area in 20 years, and the most significant break for consumers.

increase. Gasoline prices dropped 1.6 percent during 1983, climbing just 0.1 percent in December.

The broad category of fuel oil, bottled gas, and coal costs dropped a record 9.4 percent last year, even though fuel oil alone started to go up in price at the end of December.

The 1983 inflation rate, the best since the 3.4 percent of 1971 and 1972, was a more dramatic improvement than a decade ago, the government said Tuesday.

If the Labor Department switched its Consumer Price Index to read rents instead of home ownership costs a year earlier, 1982's inflation rate would have been 5 percent — 1.1 points higher than 1983, the department said.

The president's chief economist, Martin Feldstein, said the CPI reflected the trends throughout the economy.

"By virtually every major inflation index, the line is being held on cost," he said. "Unlike 1972, inflation this year was low without price controls."

Food costs in December, up 0.3 percent, also would have been higher had the price survey been later in the month, when a freeze destroyed more than a fifth of Florida's orange crop and devastated vegetable crops in both Texas and Florida.

Food prices for the whole year were up only 2.7 percent, the least since 1976.

December's inflation report promises to be the best for some time, because the January index will register the fuel oil and produce surges. But analysts still agree that 1984's inflation rate should show only gentle acceleration, to around 5 percent.

"The stabilization of inflation in 1983 is the most remarkable economic achievement of the last three years," economist Jerry Jasinoski said, speaking for the National Association of Manufacturers.

The reasons usually mentioned for 1983's good inflation performance concern the intense competition with foreign imports for American spending money, and the shortage of cash among those still unemployed or in industries unable to join in the recovery.

U.S. water plan criticized

United Press International

PHILADELPHIA — The Reagan administration's battle plan to protect the nation's ground water supply states the responsibility — but not the money — to carry out the job, a House subcommittee chairman said Tuesday.

Rep. Mike Synar, D-Okla., leveled the charge in a speech to a national conference on water pollution attended by some 360 leading scientists, engineers, environmentalists and government regulators.

The Environmental Protection Agency was slated to unveil its long-awaited "ground water protection strategy" this month, but the agency has postponed its release until May, an EPA spokesman in Washington said Tuesday.

Synar, chairman of a House government operations subcommittee, said he has learned the agency's latest draft proposal for protecting precious underground water from toxic chemical contamination recognizes "states have the primary responsibility for managing and protecting ground water."

"It also indicates that states are best suited to undertake direct implementation and enforcement of ground water protection programs," he said, adding the administration has "no plans for additional financial assistance to states in carrying out these increased responsibilities."

Americans get about half their drinking water from underground storage areas

known as aquifers. Some major metropolitan areas are heavily dependent on ground water, including San Antonio, Long Island, N.Y.; Memphis, Tenn.; Dayton, Ohio; Tucson, Ariz.; and Miami, Fla.

"To ask state and local governments to assume greater responsibility in these areas, knowing they lack the necessary resources and without providing financial support, is simply passing the buck," Synar asserted.

The EPA's proposed ground water policy, he said, would place aquifers into three categories:

- Greatest protection would be given to "special aquifers, defined as those which are especially vulnerable to contamination, and which are the sole or an essential source of drinking water for a given area, or vital to a sensitive ecological system."
- "Second priority would be given to aquifers currently used or potentially usable for drinking water."
- "Lowest priority would be given to aquifers that are not considered potential sources of drinking water because of salinity (salt content) or existing contamination."

The administration plan also would develop programs to deal with ground water threats from storage tanks and surface waste sites, Synar said.

The EPA declined immediate comment on Synar's speech, but a top agency water pollution official, Marion May, today will address the two-day water conference at the prestigious Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia.

Cattlemen urged to help government

United Press International

NEW ORLEANS — U.S. Agriculture Secretary John Block encouraged 4,000 cattlemen Tuesday to abandon their wariness of government and join in shaping America's relationship with nations around the world.

Block praised members of the National Cattlemen's Association for their commitment to free enterprise, but chided them

for standing back when their contributions could help set goals for agriculture and international trade.

"A strong agricultural economy is essential to maintaining American influence around the world," he said.

"If we are a reliable supplier of food and fiber to other countries, we strengthen America throughout the world. An agriculture that is thriving will mean power to America."

As Block and Vice President George Bush addressed the NCA convention, about 20 animal rights activists picketed in protest of National Meat Week. The demonstrators encouraged consumers to eat less

meat in defiance of the industry's current campaign.

In his address, Block said there were many crucial questions left unanswered about the 1985 farm bill, including who would get government assistance, and how much would be given.

He said input from the cattlemen was especially important now — as the American public neared its limit of how much aid it was willing to "shell out."

"The broadest participation is what we want," Block said. "I feel the role of government is creating a climate in which the agriculture industry can contribute the most to this country and the world."

He said he had met recently with Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang during his visit to the United States, exploring options for U.S. trade. Though the discussions centered on no particular commodity, they showed a great potential, Block said.

"If you're looking at a country with a billion people, sure there's something you can do with them," he said.

In a speech to the NCA's general session, retiring president W.J. Waldrip echoed Block's call for cattlemen to make their presence felt in 1985 farm legislation.

Economist warns against unregulated farm market

United Press International

LUBBOCK — Federal farm legislation has seen major revisions only four times in the last 50 years, state agricultural extension economist Ronald Knutson of College Station said Tuesday.

"Two-thirds of the time we fine tune" farm policy, Knutson told about 120 people attending an annual policy conference sponsored by the extension service.

"I think the odds are that we'll tend to fine tune the 1981 farm bill and I think if we're not going to go that way then farmers are going to have to get in the middle of the battle," Knutson predicted of the upcoming farm bill.

He said many complex issues would be debated by Congress during the formation of the 1985 farm bill, including production control options, target prices and loan rates.

The only major changes to farm legislation in the last 50 years came during 1938, 1956, 1965 and 1977, Knutson said, adding the last major change was the establishment of farmer-owned grain reserves.

Knutson suggested that target prices should be tied to production costs and a range of production control options should be examined. He warned farmers that minimal government involvement or a free market could be harsh on them.

"Free market cotton policies probably would be politically unacceptable to producers," he said.

Several members of a producers panel agreed with Knutson's comments on a free market.

"The free market does not exist and it will not exist," said Grain Sorghum Producers Association official Robert Green of Dalhart. He is the association's vice president for legislation.

"We cannot export our way out of problems," he added, advocating instead production controls.

Plains Cotton Growers president Tommy Fondren of Lovelock, Nev., agreed American farmers would not be able to compete with foreign producers on a free market because they must observe more government regulations than foreign producers.



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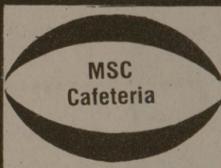
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