

# Consumer groups wary of USDA

WASHINGTON (AP) — Consumer advocates say they're wary about the Agriculture Department's willingness to implement food safety and environmental reforms included in the 1990 farm bill.

Officials of two consumer groups — the League of Women Voters and Public Voice for Food and Health Policy — promised Tuesday to keep the spotlight on USDA and Congress as the work begins to fund and put into practice the policy decisions Congress made in drafting the five-year farm bill.

Ellen Haas, executive director of the Public Voice, said there is "no question" that she is skeptical of USDA's willingness to implement new environmental and consumer policies, given its record on those issues.

Areas of concern include organic foods certification, water quality protection, pesticide record-keeping and sustainable agriculture research.

While the farm bill is described as landmark legislation because of its

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— Ellen Haas, executive director of the Public Voice for Food and Health Policy

environmental provisions, Public Voice said the initiatives do not necessarily mean substantial gains for consumers and the environment. At issue are whether adequate funding will be provided and whether federal agencies implement and enforce the policies effectively.

"These environmental and consumer breakthroughs are only as effective as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's commitment to implement them," Haas said.

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safe when in fact there are enormous gaps."

USDA spokeswoman Kelly Shipp said the agency would "implement the law — that's our job." She said Public Voice over the last decade had not been happy with any administration's implementation of any kind of environmental provisions.

"It's fine if Public Voice wants to put the spotlight on USDA because we're always under a tremendous amount of pressure," Shipp said.

Keith Jones, director of the office of sustainable agriculture at the Texas Department of Agriculture,

said however that "we are dealing with an obviously hostile agency" when it comes to issues such as sustainable agriculture.

"There's a general concern out there that we're dealing with a hostile agency and we don't really know what that's going to translate into," Jones said.

"It is common knowledge that USDA has been hostile to anything that would move agriculture in a more environmentally sound direction — they've certainly dragged their feet on almost every occasion."

TDA has certified more than 200 organic producers in Texas, who sell everything from grains and aloe vera to citrus and peaches. Texas' certified organic producers use no synthetic herbicides, pesticides or fertilizers.

The state's organic food market is worth \$45 million at the retail level, Jones said.

## Speaker Lewis hires lawyers, spokesmen

AUSTIN (AP) — House Speaker Gib Lewis, whose ties to a large law firm are under investigation by a grand jury, has hired two former prosecutors and two former aides to Gov.-elect Ann Richards to represent him.

Political consultants Glenn Smith and Monte Williams, who worked in Richards' campaign, will act as Lewis' press spokesmen on the case, Williams said Tuesday.

The four-term House speaker also has hired lawyers Bill Wilms and H. Allen Hill Jr., Williams said. Both lawyers have worked for the Travis County Public Integrity Unit, which is conducting the investigation.

Smith was Richards' campaign manager during the Democratic primary.

He and Williams said Lewis wants to ensure that the investigation does not detract from his ability to lead the Texas House when the Legislature convenes next month.

Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle said the focus of the grand jury probe is widening to include more lawmakers and lobbyists.

The inquiry started focusing on Lewis and the San Antonio law firm of Heard Goggan Blair & Williams, which paid about half of a delinquent tax bill in 1989 for a company half-owned by Lewis.

The grand jury also has been looking into three tropical vacations Lewis took with Heard Goggan employees.

Earle said questions have arisen concerning Heard Goggan's influence on the Legislature that would have affected government contracts by private firms in collecting delinquent property taxes.

"We probably will be calling members of the Legislature and lobbyists to testify before we're through," he said. "The general subject has to do with the Legislature and its relationship to the lobby."

At least one state lawmaker, Rep. Jerry Beauchamp, D-San Antonio, has been subpoenaed to appear before the grand jury, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram reported Tuesday.

## 'Saudi Arabia After Dark' teaches navigation Stars used as guides in desert

DALLAS (AP) — "Saudi Arabia After Dark" — it sounds like Dallas' newest nightclub. But not at Richland Community College.

At Richland, Saudi Arabia After Dark means an intense, two-part course about the Saudi Arabian night sky. It is intended to prevent future American soldiers who might be assigned to Operation Desert Shield from getting lost in that country's vast, featureless desert.

The course is the only one of its kind in the United States, according to Bill Dexter, planetarium director.

"Our advantage is nighttime warfare," Dexter said. "If these guys just get some basic skills under their belt, they'll be able to know where they are."

The class, a study of celestial navigation, is normally taught over a semester. But last Saturday (Dec. 8), Dexter crammed everything into a two-hour session for about 24 Marine recruits. A second session will be held in about a month.

The students learned how to orient themselves using a dime, an aspirin and a fist and how to divide the night sky into halves. They were told that if they became lost, they should sit calmly — if possible, Dexter joked — and search the constellations for the North Star. That would then serve as their beacon.

He reminded them that their tanks wouldn't come equipped with local maps.

Overhead as he spoke, the Saudi night sky appeared. The stars were brilliant and dense. The college's planetarium can display the sky anywhere on Earth, from

any time in the present, past or future.

The students, mostly high school seniors who plan to join the Marines after graduation, said they enjoyed the session. Some said they'd be spending a lot more time in their back yards, mapping the heavens.

"I think it was really good," said Robert Boyett, 17, a senior at Alvarado High School. "I had never seen anything like that before."

"This was really educational," said Rhonda Stephens, an 18-year-old senior at Arlington High School. "I didn't know anything about the stars before."

Dexter, an astronomy teacher at Richland, said knowing how to use the sky is crucial for soldiers in the desert, where landmarks are virtually nonexistent.

American troops in the Middle East use magnetic compasses, but the instruments are limited because they are almost impossible to read at night, he said.

Gunnery Sgt. Jeff Kilroy, head of the Marine recruiting office in Arlington, said he wished the course were available to troops in the field.

"One of the things to being a Marine is being a sponge" and soaking up information, he said. "You never know when something like this could come in handy."

Dexter says he plans to prepare a training manual to send to soldiers in the Persian Gulf.

"I think there's a need for this," he said. "If necessary, I'll go to Saudi Arabia with my sky chart."

## Commission allows expansion

HOUSTON (AP) — A small Houston trucking firm is the recipient of an unprecedented license from the Texas Railroad Commission that will allow it to build the state's largest intrastate trucking company.

Joel Mallory said Monday he plans to transform his 40-truck firm, known as Mallory's Dependable Delivery Service, into a mammoth company almost overnight.

He is talking with investment bankers about raising \$20 million in the next 18 months to buy 200 trucks in the next year and set up divisions for refrigerated, tank, flatbed, dry goods, oil-field and small-parcel delivery.

After more than two years of hearings on the subject, the Texas Railroad Commission last week granted Mallory a certificate to provide trucking service statewide for a

broad range of commodities.

The ruling provides the first such wide-ranging authorization ever granted under the commission's minority business enterprise rules and is the broadest trucking authority ever permitted by the panel.

"It's almost mind-boggling what they just received," said Tom Burke, director of public relations for Waco-based Central Freight Lines, the state's largest intrastate trucking line.

"They may not realize what they possess. ... It's the biggest, most significant authority ever granted by the Railroad Commission."

Central Freight Lines, with 4,500 employees operating more than 2,500 trucks and 4,500 trailers, has authority to service only 1,800 of the state's delivery points, Burke said.

The commission has awarded dozens of certificates under its mi-

nority enterprise rule — which was adopted in 1988 to increase the

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number of minority trucking firms — but those have been for only limited areas of the state, said agency spokesman Brian Schaible.

The agency has been criticized in the past for tightly restricting competition in the state at a time when interstate trucking has been largely deregulated.

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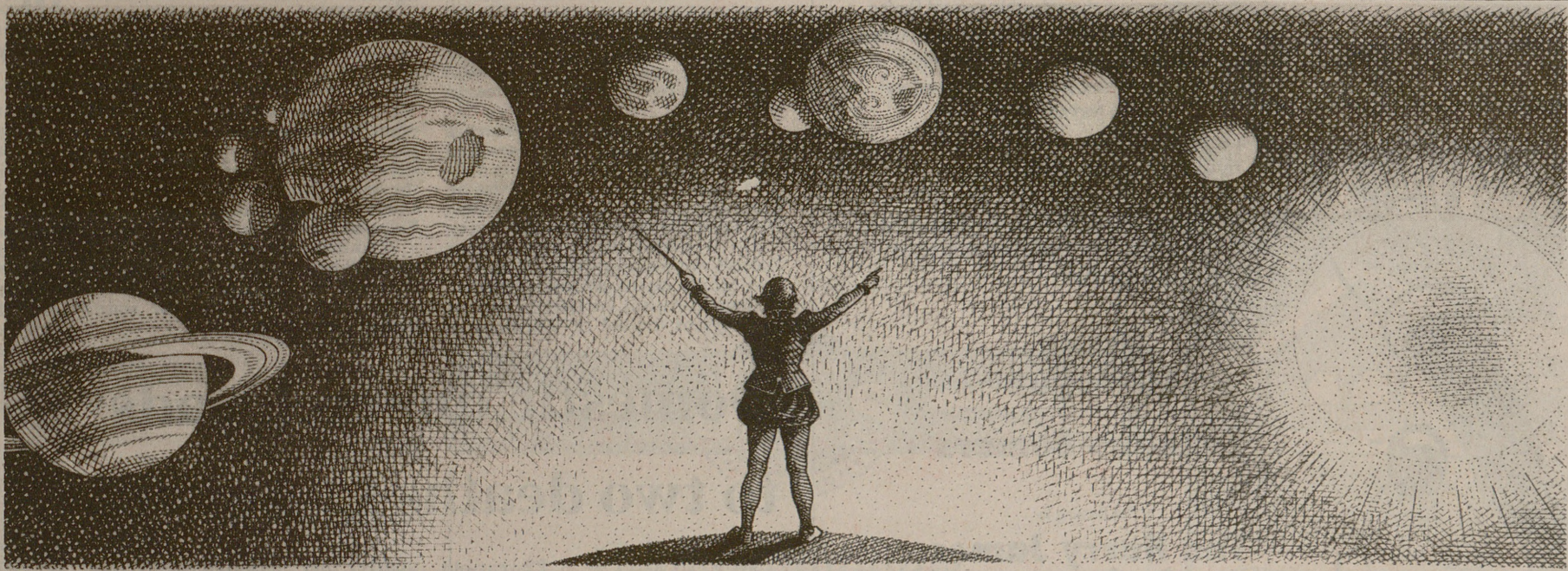
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