

## **PEOPLE AND AGRICULTURE: CAN THEY COEXIST?**

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**The overriding concern of people in agriculture: ranchers, farmers and technical experts, is how to change production practices to stay competitive in agriculture's dynamic markets without stumbling financially. Coexistence is a relatively new management concern; one requiring increasing amounts of time learning about regulations and money to comply with them.**

**But at root, coexistence is not as much a technical management problem as it is a people problem. What is needed are people in agriculture, and people outside agriculture, understanding each others' concerns and working at ways to coexist amicably.**

**Agricultural people will have to take the lead in what will be a long-term educational and communication task. Something like two-thirds of Florida's elected representatives come from the eight most populous counties, and urban dwellers outnumber people in agriculture by about ten to one.**

**People problems are not new, we've always had to get along with neighbors. Neighboring has never been easy. Every rancher has had a nitwit neighbor who wouldn't help keep the fences up, and every city dweller knows a neighbor whose dog didn't respect property lines. One thing is certain: the best way to deal with people problems is to settle them personally without involving the courts. The problem is that the more removed neighbors are, and the less they know about one another, the harder it is to communicate.**

**There are at least three answers to the question, "Can people and agriculture coexist?", and we'll take them up in turn. Our interest is in why they must, why they should, and how they can.**

### **They must**

**People inside and outside of agriculture must get along because both need a healthy agriculture. For the most basic reason: If, or when, the bullets fly again, we all want our food supply assured and nearby. Thank God it is in America. And it will stay that way; differences will dissolve before agricultures' basic health is jeopardized.**

**In addition to providing food, agriculture is a must for water recharge. And for nurturing a nucleus of wildlife populations in suitable habitat outside the limited space that is financially feasible in publicly owned parks.**

### **They Should**

**Coexistence begins by both parties realizing that the basic concerns for a healthy agriculture and a clean environment are shared. Everybody wants clean streams and lakes, especially people who live in the country. Everybody wants as much wildlife as possible, especially people who live in the country.**

**Ranchers are, almost to a man, die-hard conservationists. My Uncle John wouldn't let his blood-thirsty young nephew kill a coyote. "They belong here, son", he said. And going back a little further in time, the Government didn't save the buffalo, a rancher**

named Goodnight did. He had saved a small herd from which most of the present buffalo herd are descendent.

Here in Florida, panthers are an endangered species, and private ranches (Babcock and Alico, to name two) have had far more to do with preserving Florida panthers than the Florida legislature and all the environmental groups put together. And the largest population of nesting bald eagles in the Southeast is in the Cross Creek area on privately owned land, where they have been protected by the people who live there. Nests on publicly owned land are largely abandoned. This side of private land ownership is virtually unknown to the public.

Agriculture pays its way through property taxes earned while producing abundant supplies of agricultural products which have made it possible for U.S. consumers (that's all of us) to spend a steadily diminishing percentage of disposable income for food.

Agriculture produces income while providing open space and making few demands on society for roads, sewers, and police services.

There are no one-way economic streets. People who come in increasing droves to seek Florida sunshine do bring with them traffic snarls, increasing demands on water supplies, and regulations that tax ranchers' patience and pocket-books. But those same people bring money which hold land prices up, and thus put a strong foundation under Florida agricultural balance sheets.

Urban people's desire to escape an increasingly plastic world also creates possibilities for increasing operating income through turf grass sales, hunting and fishing leases, and endless other opportunities for those land-owners willing to supply open-space amenities in attractive packages. Few other places in the nation are so blessed. Ranchers in West Texas can pray for rain and hope the cow markets hold, and that's it.

### They Can

**Coexistence is a communication problem, and agricultural people have more at stake, sooner, than do urban people. Since agricultural people are so outnumbered, communication is going to have to be a high priority for everyone in agriculture.**

○ Why not host some media tours? Let the eyes and ears of the public see first-hand what you are doing to preserve wildlife; to manage the land so that your grand-kids can know the grand country in which cattle are raised.

○ Nobody can educate parents like kids. Host tours of young people. Let them see, feel, taste and smell the environment which you cherish, manage and protect.

○ Talk to civic clubs. Eloquence isn't necessary, the truth carries conviction. Don't go to pick a fight or to vent frustrations, but to explain how you really make a living, what a bite out of income property taxes are and the investments you have made to coax an income from agriculture in the face of low and uncertain returns.

○ Serve on committees and planning boards. Frustrating and time consuming as that may be, the importance of friendly personal contact cannot be overstated. Also some County Extension personnel are providing an important dual role by serving on local planning boards. They educate the planners about agriculture, and acquaint agriculturists with compliance requirements.

○ Ben Franklin said that the only thing more expensive than education is ignorance. Education is slow, but progress is being made. "More health professionals now recognize, and say, that lean cuts of beef fit into fat-restricted diets." (NCA, p. 2). And in Europe, where the animal-rights

movement originated, "The public is getting tired of the movement." (Behar, p. 44). So progress is indeed possible on land-use planning and regulation.

## CONCLUSION

Agriculture and people can coexist, and they will, because people inside and outside agriculture need each other. Communication is everybody's responsibility, and agriculture has a real success story to tell about its role in preserving the environment while paying its way, demanding little from society and returning much.

## REFERENCES

- Behar, Richard. "Meet the Meatless", in FORBES, March 20, 1989, p. 43-44.
- National Cattlemen's Association. BEEF BUSINESS BULLETIN, Vol. 12, No. 23, March 3, 1989.