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County Agent's Notes: Food prices may push us back to the garden - February 5, 2001

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County Agent's Notes:

February 5, 2000

Food prices may push us back to the garden.

With increases in the cost of transportation, processing, refrigeration, and scores of other things we are likely to see upward trends in the prices we pay for food at the grocery within the next few months. For several years our economy has soared, with many fortunate people becoming wealthy through investments. During this period of prosperity the Consumer Price Index (CPI) also soared, with higher and higher prices being paid for virtually everything.

Now the party seems to be over, and we have realized that the economy is not nearly as strong as we thought. Prices are still in the clouds and it's going to take a while for them to come down. For the past two years the CPI for all items purchased in a major southern city increased from 2 to as high as 7 full points per month, however after November 2000 the index stopped increasing but seems unable to come down. During the same period the CPI for food served at home actually showed a slight downward trend. While this is encouraging, we need to start thinking about ways to ensure our local food supply.

Several realities suggest that we should begin to localize more of our food production rather than continuing to produce so much of it in centralized areas like California and Florida. The first of these is the cost of transportation. Another is the cost of processing and storage. A critical factor is the cost of fertilizers, particularly nitrogen, which increases every day.

When I bring up this subject with people who live in town and particularly in families where both husband and wife have regular jobs, the reaction I usually get is "I don't have time to

work a garden”. And without a major lifestyle change these people really don’t have the time to work a home garden the way it should be done. The alternative is to allow local farmers to grow more of the food we need, and they could easily do the job if they knew there would be a dependable market for the things they could produce.

Most families can have a small garden to grow a few fresh items for the table; like tomatoes, okra, cucumbers, etc. but when it comes to the crops that require a lot of land it’s difficult for the home gardener to do the job. It takes a dedicated farmer with the knowledge and the equipment to grow enough of these crops. Crops like sweet corn, peas, beans, grains, melons, processing tomatoes, greens, lettuce and others lend themselves best to larger operations where large quantities can be produced efficiently. Many of these crops can be machine harvested in these larger fields whereas home gardeners must hand pick everything.

Another alternative is what I will call a “contract garden”. In this arrangement, consumers might reach an agreement with one or more local farmers to produce, process, and store specific types and quantities of food. The possibilities for this type of arrangement are unlimited, and might include fresh produce, frozen produce, meat, eggs, grains, and dairy products. The only problem with this is the “value-added” products we have become accustomed to may not be available; there might be no “TV” dinners. We could be deprived of some of the niceties we have gotten used to, however real hunger would not be known. This is the real enemy our population has not faced since the “Great Depression” and I hope we are smart enough today to avoid it.

When the shock from your December 2000 gas bill settled in, most of you reacted by making changes to conserve and to utilize alternatives. An even greater shock would be an increase in the cost of food equal to the increases we have seen in the price of heating fuel. We

would prefer to believe this is not possible, but I suggest to you that it is very possible. How you choose to handle this potential problem is in your hands. I would like nothing better than to see local farmers producing for local people, but without clear justification the process of building such a system will not begin. Should enough local people choose to build a production system like this it could begin this year; if you think this makes sense give me a call.