

ALWAYS WELL FED

Leonard Blackham, Utah Commissioner of Agriculture and Food, recently visited local leaders to consider the sustainability of agriculture in Cache County. The Commissioner has an obvious passion for the agricultural industry and expresses an appreciation for the standard of living we all take for granted. He is not bashful about exploring any idea that will enhance the long term sustainability of the industry. He takes seriously his responsibility of feeding and clothing the citizens of this State, as well as the people of the world.

Commissioner Blackham is not a naive person. He has years of experience in a variety of settings. Among other things, the Commissioner has served in a multitude of executive and legislative positions on the local, state and national levels. In those positions he has travelled much, discussed much, listened much and is known as a keen observer. I was interested in some of his observations.

Mr. Blackham explained that our society has been fed so well, for so many years, that we don't seem to worry about agricultural sustainability anymore. Agricultural sustainability is seldom an agenda item when legislative bodies meet. We assume our food will always be there with no planning, sacrifice or effort on our part. The average US consumer spends less than ten percent of their disposable income on food, yet the variety, quality, and convenience of that food is unsurpassed. Food is a real bargain, but few people give it much thought. We have come to simply expect it.

As a society we are also well educated, yet we are constantly planning for new schools, better training resources, and improved pay for those who teach. We travel freely from place to place, and transportation is forever an item of discussion in legislative circles. We think nothing of taxing ourselves to lay more roads and to enhance transportation options. We are frequently entertained and have diverse recreational opportunities, and we still plan for more places to hike, swim, fish, golf, or engage in any other form of entertainment or amusement.

Land that is in agricultural production is generally considered land in waiting----a limited resource waiting to be put to the "highest and best use". Is land covered with buildings and blacktop really a higher and better use than productive land that is growing a new crop annually? Do we really want to become dependent on other countries as providers of our food? Do we need to be thinking more seriously about our ability to feed ourselves in future years, or do we have more important things to consider? The Commissioner observed that people are generally quite content when they have a full belly. If hungry, however, only one thing matters.

Recent statistics show that the farmers and ranchers of Cache County produced \$136,064,000 of agricultural products during the last reported year. That \$136 million is direct sales, no multiplier, new wealth, right out of the ground, stimulating our local economy in a profound way. As a means of comparison, the US Census credits the Accommodations and Food Services industry with generating \$95,153,000 and Arts Entertainment and Recreation infuse our local economy with an additional \$23,238,000. The message seems to be that the diversity of our economy is vital to our economic well-being and also to our pleasant standard of living. To some people "highest and best use" may mean saving as much agricultural land as we reasonably can. Others will have a different opinion.

Last year, USDA unveiled the new national “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative. Officials contend that the American people want to be more engaged in their food supply. That includes a national conversation to help develop local and regional food systems and to spur local economic opportunities. The initiative suggests that consumers want to know where their food comes from. They also want to grow much of their own. If that is the case, we must focus more on food security, heritage values, environmental benefits of bio-diversity and an ability to actually produce agricultural products.

Planners tell us that Cache County can expect a doubling of the population within the next 30 years. We will need roads, schools, homes, churches, and recreational facilities. We will also need productive farmland if we hope to feed ourselves. Our local planning office continues to work on strategies that will guide us in future years. State legislators are also considering options that may be beneficial. Most importantly, citizens must look forward, get involved, share opinions, and plan wisely for future generations. We owe that to those who will follow.