

03SHORT.DOC

Congress threatens to kill the farm bill the next session. All the Department of Agriculture programs, so news analysts predict, except food stamps, will be ended or phased out. Way up in the Northeast, a Congressman still brags of taking the sheep and goat herders off of the incentive program we received from the tariff on imported fibers. Ever since the defeat of the program, woolie operators have been in a tailspin that'd make a tornado swirling across the Panhandle of Texas look like gentle gulf zephyrs floating across the bay.

Out here in the shortgrass country, we over-qualify for all subsidies and supports. Sheep and goat ranchers struggle to raise the money to shear. Crop farmers fight to stay afloat, and cow herders can't see four days of open daylight from one season to the next. The few beehives around depend on artificial flowers to make it through the summers and have to be moved south in the winters. Cotton farmers spend all spring watching flood water wash out the terraces and use up their summers spraying wet-weather bugs.

We have floods equal to the Delta country and drouths worse than the Gobi. Takes an awful hard-hearted congressman to deny help to the shortgrass country. He or she must be void of any compassion for the miseries of the ranching and farming of desperate lands, unblessed by the shortest intermission from a merciless climate, plagued by a

market structure reeking of collusion, cursed by usurious money rates, and blasted by every pestilence and predator loose on this earth.

Wool producers are organizing a co-op to face the loss of the incentive. The last account reported 125 herders had joined, representing about 125,000 to 150,000 fleeces of wool. The mohair people already had a pool in effect before the incentive programs ended. Also, a lot of ranchers have been switching to long-legged birds and fancy meat goats to broaden their opportunities. We don't have the browse for goats on our country, but the big bird potential looks good. Eagles wintering up here on the Divide grow strong pin feathers and big yellow beaks and long sharp talons, especially if an early lambing or kidding operation is in effect. Whether Emus and ostriches adapt to the eagle flyways hasn't been tested. In a ground battle, it looks like an ostrich trained to kick like a Japanese wrestler would have enough reach to pick a eagle cleaner than the front grille on a sports car.

One thing slowing us up in the bird business was a shortage in nesting material. The past 35 months of dry weather trimmed off the grasses and thinned the shrubbery so much, the only birds nesting at the ranch are cactus wrens, and night hawks that scrape up gravel to make their nests on the ground.

Bird food has been in oversupply. Red tail hawks have grown so obese eating jumbo grasshoppers this summer, they

have to wait for at least a 30 mile an hour tail wind to take off. The straight diet of jumbos hurt the immature hawks, too. Instead of waiting for the right time to fly from the nests, the babies have been fed so many hoppers, they leap off out in the air without waiting for flying lessons from their mothers. Pretty sad old sight to see a baby hawk grounded out in a swarm of jumbo grasshoppers.

Red tails aren't the only wild fowl effected by a straight diet of grasshoppers. Wild turkey gobblers hiccough so bad from eating grasshoppers, they pop their beards off, just like one of those animal trainers snapping the popper off his whip from hurrying a lion too fast. Walt Disney's shows miss this kind of lore, but after a big siege of grasshoppers, only experts can tell the hens from the gobblers.

Newspapers blabbed it all over the editorial pages after the last election how the majority favored less government and supported such outlandish things as shorter terms of office. Quite an art developed among the worthies at sidestepping and disobeying these instructions. When I marked my ballot, however, I thought it was understood by the way I split the ticket that I meant to increase the benefits for ranchers and provide seminars to teach farmers and golf playing city folks to look after themselves. I'd have put it in the form of a footnote, except I felt like the election judge might rule it was a mutilated ballot.

Over and over, it's said that one of the big failings of man is lack of communication. However, in the case of Congress, it might be lack of summary punishment for perfecting insubordination...