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The newsletter a week ago from the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, a big hollow-horn group, reported that the Secretary of Agriculture has arranged for 300.1 million metric tons of food to be shipped to Russia. Just flipping through the list of the shipment are the following: "120,000 metric tons of beef, 50,000 metric tons of pork, 500,000 metric tons of corn," and on and on, through wheat and soybeans to a conclusion of "30,000 metric tons of non-fat dry milk."

Sounded as if this \$625 million dollars worth of food will leave the U.S. in December to reach those unfortunate people at about the peak of the coldest winter in a long time in Europe. My hopes were the Russians might become our friends. I mean friends of the farmers and ranchers in this country.

I looked up "metric ton" in the dictionary, the only reference book at the ranch except Dr. Le Gear's Veterinarian manual. A metric ton is 2240 pounds heavier than a regular ton, or 2240.6 pounds. I set out to multiply 300.1 million times 2240 to find the amount of pounds involved, then realized if I wasn't able place 300.1 million in zeroes, I wasn't going to be able to place 2240 times that much in zeroes, much less place that many commas. My idea was to find the amount of pounds the food weighed. Next, in case the environmentalist camp wanted in on our act, they

could ship the Russians a bigger boat load of pamphlets and best-selling books.

However, I was becoming comfortable in reading of millions and billions of dollars and only uncomfortable in comparing how the millions and billions were being spent. Like the recent budget gave farmers six billion dollars, and the closest the tenders of flocks came to being part of the bill was a low interest loan program for Angora goat herders. Other tidbits were five billion dollars to pass through the World Bank to help Brazil, 400 million to comfort Israel, and a whopping 200 million bucks to heal ranchers from the 1998 drouth and flood disasters.

I was so eager to sign up for the drouth assistance, the night the meeting was held in the Community Center in Mertzon, I had to wait outside in my pickup for the building to be unlocked. An inside tip had warned the money was to be split among livestock producers in 18 states. The 60 or 70 ranchers in Irion County were going to be dividing up all that dough with herders from Alabama to the Carolinas up into the Dakotas and back across to Colorado and Kansas to take in the Southwest.

Turned out the meeting was to explain the program requirements and to make an appointment to do the paperwork. The chairman was sure the shortgrass country was going to pass the below average rainfall and deficit forage test by a wide margin as we are accepted as being the leaders in global dehydration and scalped earth practices.

About the only chance I saw of cornering any of the coin was if the fall cattle market had stunned the whole industry to the point that out of state operators had stopped reading the newspapers and were unaware of the program. Perhaps an old boy stuck off out on the flats in New Mexico would become so heartsick over his light lambs and his thin cows going into the winter, he might overlook a new program. But you can bet your Aunt Tillie's silver set against next year's fur market on white striped skunks that the New Mexico jugkeepers banking the cattle are going to know about any bill helping ag loans before the first page hits the bottom of the hopper in Congress.

Didn't take long to understand the program wasn't clearly defined. The USDA man emphasized the amount of payment wouldn't be known until the volume of the applicants were determined after the January 8th deadline. So here we all were, the grand fraternity of hardpan herders from Irion and surrounding counties looking at more disappointment. (Later I was to learn the original proposal was for seven million dollars. Congressman Henry Bonilla and Mr. Stenholm were able to raise the ante to \$200 million.)

Sitting way in the back, I remembered the 300 million metric tons of food we were sending to Russia. In front of me were some of the villainous enemies of nature who helped raise that food. I found myself wondering how we had attracted so many enemies when we are the only industry able to feed hungry people here or abroad. We even have to raise

the food to feed the wolves and the coyotes. On the way back to the ranch, I thought of all the thousands of words written and spoken by the likes of Bruce Babbitt and Al Gore without ever once using the word *famine*.