

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

Thanks for the help, John Faber

Rep. John Faber saved western Kansas from an economic body blow when, as chair of the House Agriculture Committee, he bottled up a bill designed to curb water use along the mostly dry Arkansas River.

The problem as Mr. Faber sees it — and we agree — is that the proposal would use federal Conservation Reserve money to pay farmers to idle land so the state could take well rights out of service.

We don't argue with the push to reduce pumping underground water. Rampant production of irrigated corn, while lucrative, is running the state dry in many areas. Some wells can stand that type of pumping. Many cannot.

Despite a lawsuit forcing Colorado to use less water and deliver more to the Kansas border, the Ark is dry west of Hutchinson most years. Overpumping is a major problem in the basin, as it is in many parts of the state.

How we approach this problem is critical, though. Taking huge chunks of land out of production would have a snowball effect, harming co-ops, ag suppliers, schools, businesses, whole towns.

A more reasonable approach is to buy back well rights and let farmers either graze the land or grow dryland crops on it. The blow to our economy will be far less, and for the foreseeable future, the nation will have the corn it needs and demands.

That's what Mr. Faber is standing for against pressure from the Senate and many in the House. The problem is, the bill relies on a federal program that prohibits any productive use of land covered by its payments. Rep. Jerry Moran says he'd like to change that, but it hasn't happened so far.

Make no mistake: we need to face the water problem.

Where wells are overpumped, where aquifers are dropping, where streams dry up, we need to cut back to a sustainable level. Water is not just a private property right, but a shared resource that everyone depends on.

And we have to make it last.

The state realizes it has to pay farmers for giving up their wells. The Legislature needs to recognize that our economy depends on keeping this land in production.

Rural Kansas has suffered enough, God knows. Taking more land out of production when grain supplies are tight and prices high makes no sense.

We applaud Rep. Faber for standing up to this awful bill.

With improvements in dryland seed varieties, the land can be productive for decades without irrigation. This is important to all of us out West, because whatever solution applies to the Arkansas eventually will be spread to the rest of the state.

We will have to face the irrigation issue some day, and we hope the state will have a reasonable program to help us — not the one in this bill.

Stand firm, John. — *Steve Haynes, president of Nor'West Newspapers includin gthe Colby Free Press*

About those letters . . .

The *Free Press* encourages and welcomes letters from readers. Letters should be typewritten, if at all possible, and should include a telephone number and an address. Most importantly, all letters must include a signature.

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John Van Nostrand - Publisher

jvannostrand@nwkansas.com

NEWS

Patty Decker - Editor

pdecker@nwkansas.com

Tisha Cox - General Assignment

tc Cox@nwkansas.com

Jan Katz Ackerman, Area Reporter

ackermanj@ruraltel.net

ADVERTISING

Crystal Rucker - Advertising Sales/Director

crystalr@nwkansas.com

Kristi Powell - Advertising Sales

kpowell@nwkansas.com

Emily Wederski - Advertising Sales

ewederski@nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Jeanette Applegate - Bookkeeping, Ad Building

japplegate@nwkansas.com

Everett Robert - Circulation, Classifieds

erobert@nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator

support@nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Jim Bowker - General Manager

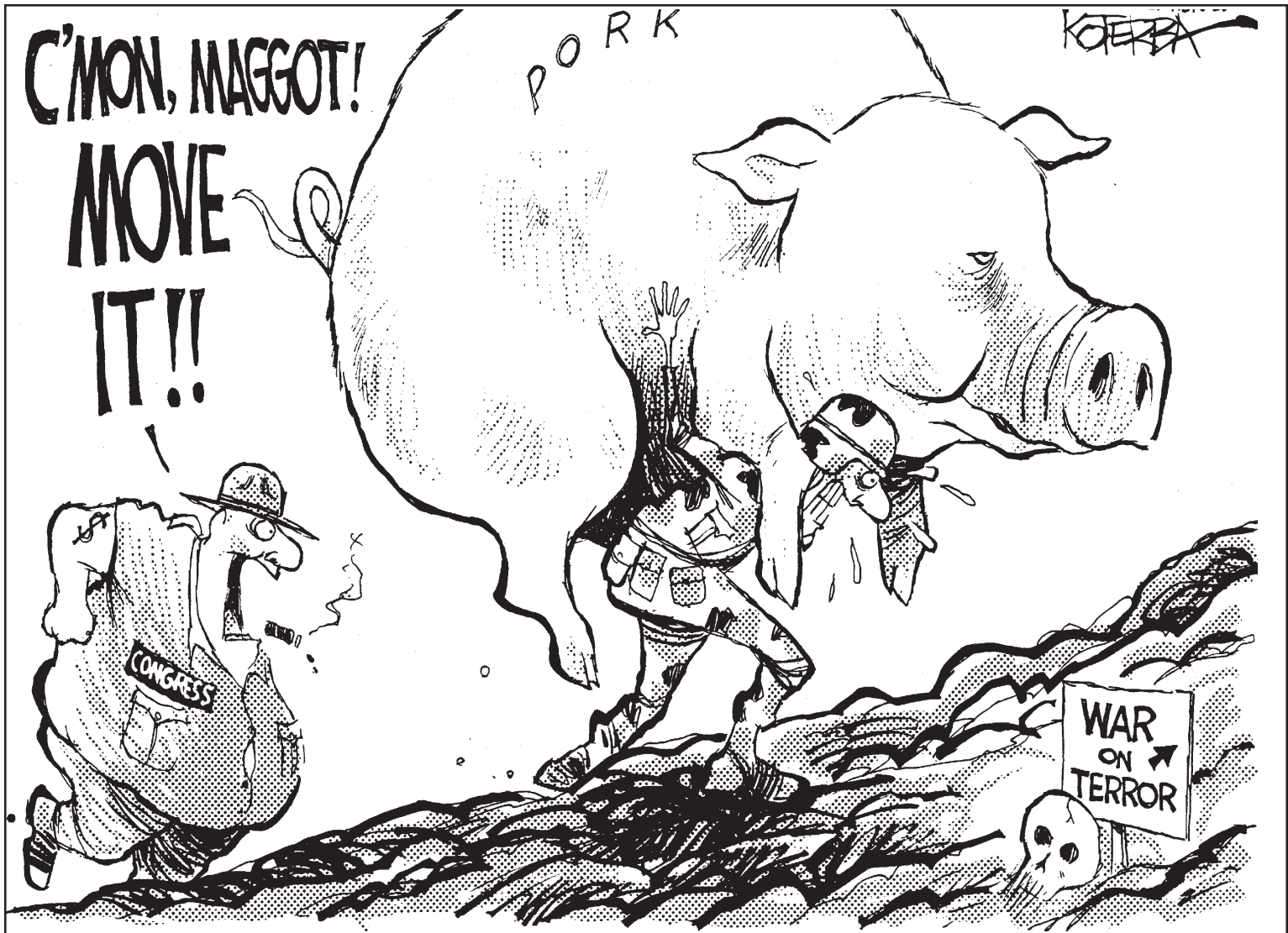
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Are you a 'brilliant' person?



Patty Decker

• Deep Thoughts

One of my friends gave me a quiz this week that is specifically for "brilliant people." In order to pass, the test-taker must get four correct answers out of a possible 10 questions — a measly 40 percent.

Not that I necessarily consider myself a "brilliant" person, I thought it would be fun to see just how far off I was from the mark.

Although I know this quiz has been around for many years, it's worth a second try for those who didn't do so well the first time.

So here goes:

- (1) How long did the Hundred Years War last?
- (2) Which country makes Panama hats?
- (3) From which animal do we get catgut?
- (4) In which month do Russians celebrate the October Revolution?
- (5) What is a camel's hair brush made of?
- (6) The Canary Islands in the Pacific are named after what animal?
- (7) What was King George VI's first name?
- (8) What color is a purple finch?
- (9) Where are Chinese gooseberries from?

...and

- (10) What is the color of the black box in a commercial airplane?

Ready for the answers?

- The Hundred Years War lasted **116 years**.
- The country known for Panama hats is **Ecuador**.
- **Sheep and horses** are the animals associated with catgut.
- The Russian Revolution is celebrated in **November**.
- **Squirrel fur** is what a camel's hair brush is made of.

made of.

- The Canary Islands are named after **dogs**.
- King George VI's first name was **Albert**.
- **Crimson** is the color of a purple finch.
- Chinese gooseberries are from **New Zealand**.

— The color of the black box on commercial airplanes is **orange**.

How did you do?

I didn't do as well as I thought I would, so we will leave it at that. I suppose I will just have to wait a little longer to be classified as one of the "brilliant people."

A short story

With Easter only two days away, my husband, Randy, sent me a story that seems appropriate during this special time due to its compassionate nature. The author is unknown, but here it is:

My six-year-old son asked if he could say grace.

As we bowed our heads he said, "God is good, God is great.

"Thank you for the food, and I would even thank you more if Mom gets us ice cream for

dessert. And Liberty and justice for all! Amen!"

Along with the laughter from the other customers nearby, I heard a woman remark, "That's what's wrong with this country. Kids today don't even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream!

"Why, I never!"

Hearing this, my son burst into tears and asked me, "Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?"

As I held him and assured him that he had done a terrific job, and God was certainly not mad at him, an elderly gentleman approached the table.

He winked at my son and said, "I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer."

"Really?" my son asked.

"Cross my heart," the man replied.

Then, in a theatrical whisper, he added (indicating the woman whose remark had started this whole thing), "Too bad she never asks God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes."

Naturally, I bought my kids ice cream at the end of the meal. My son stared at his for a moment, and then did something I will remember the rest of my life.

He picked up his sundae and, without a word, walked over and placed it in front of the woman. With a big smile he told her, "Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes; and my soul is good already."

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Decker is editor of the Free Press. Her column appears on Fridays.

Pricier corn is good for the nation

By Jim Harkness

Listen closely, and you can hear a growing roar of worry about the high price of corn, increasing from \$2.60 a bushel last year to near \$4 a bushel now.

It's just one crop, right, so who cares?

Well, corn isn't just any crop. Corn is the key ingredient in a number of foods and soft drinks. It feeds our hogs, beef and poultry. It is driving the exploding ethanol market. And its rising price is a harbinger of major changes taking place in agriculture.

For decades, corn has been ridiculously cheap. So cheap, in fact, that the market price paid to farmers has routinely been well below the cost of production. Grain companies have gobbled up the bargain. High fructose corn syrup, with corn as its main ingredient, replaced sugar in the 1980s as the main sweetener in soft drinks and other products. Cheap corn for animal feed made mega-hog, -beef, and -poultry operations commercially viable. It helped to bring 99-cent burgers to our fast food chains.

And multinational grain companies exported our cheap corn to gain footholds in other markets around the world, often driving farmers in poor countries out of business.

Corn wasn't always so cheap. In 1980, it was the equivalent of \$5.69 a bushel in today's dollars. What happened?

Several decades ago, the government used a series of tools including a price floor and supply management to stabilize corn prices. But a series of farm bills since 1980 stripped away those tools, and set incentives to encourage farmers to overproduce corn. The result was

massive oversupply, rock bottom prices, and the loss of many farmers.

Taxpayers now pay farmers between \$15 billion to \$20 billion a year to make up for low market prices. And the grain companies utilizing cheap corn and other crops have made out like bandits.

But ethanol is changing this entrenched system and that has some worried. By dramatically boosting demand for corn as a feedstock for ethanol production, we have seen a jump in prices. Grain companies are paying farmers a fair rate. Soft drink companies are warning of higher prices. Beef companies are slowing down production because of higher feed costs. Corn for ethanol use is expected to eclipse corn for export this year.

Environmentalists worry that a dramatic increase in corn acres, with expected increases in pesticide and fertilizer use, will degrade soil and water quality. Those are some concerns, but who gains from a fair price for corn? Certainly farmers do. Corn's increased value has raised prices across other major commodities too, including wheat and soybeans.

Taxpayers also win. When market prices rise, subsidies paid by taxpayers fall. We've already seen a \$7 billion drop in agriculture subsidies from 2005 to 2006, with more expected in 2007.

Public health stands to gain too. Consumer research shows that price plays a significant role in the food we purchase. If soft drinks and greasy burgers start to cost more, healthier foods including grass-fed beef and fruits and vegetables, become more competitive.

The environment stands to gain from higher

priced corn as well. Higher feed costs make industrial mega meat and poultry farms much less competitive. The environmental community has fought against these operations because of concerns about antibiotic use, animal welfare, manure spills and resulting water contamination.

Higher price is also a necessary step to shifting the biofuels industry beyond corn. Most believe corn is just the first wave of biofuels feedstock, and other environmentally friendly crops like switchgrass represent the next wave.

The eventual shift to perennial crops that use fewer or no pesticides and fertilizers will represent a huge gain for the environment. Not to mention reductions in greenhouse gases as we shift away from fossil fuels. Higher corn prices accelerate that shift by making environmentally friendly crops more competitive.

Any time the status quo is rattled, people get nervous. In the case of corn, a small group of very big grain companies has reaped tremendous rewards over the last few decades.

This new era of high-priced corn gives the rest of us a chance to benefit from a new kind of bounty.

— *Jim Harkness is the president of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, headquartered in Minneapolis, is a policy research center committed to creating environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities and regions through sound agriculture and trade policy. www.iaatp.org. Distributed by minutemanmedia.org.*

Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

