

Ethiopia: tip of the iceberg

Editor's Note: Pictures of the famine in Ethiopia should warn us of more than the immediate tragedy they represent. Basically, writes PNS commentator Lester R. Brown, the world's ability to produce adequate food supplies is falling, and will continue to do so unless we act. Brown is president of Worldwatch Institute and project director of its Annual State of the World Reports.

by Lester R. Brown

Ethiopia's famine is more than a tragic but temporary emergency. It is the most visible sign today of what has been a dangerous, decade-long shift in the entire world food economy.

From 1950 until 1973, global food production surged, outstripping population growth and holding out the hope that hunger could be banished. But since 1973, food production has barely kept pace with population — and this trend seems certain to continue, or worsen, unless the global economy comes into better balance with the ecosystem.

—Less farmland per person. Most of the world's tillable soil is already being tilled. A U.S. Dept. of Agriculture study indicates that world farmland will expand by only four percent between 1980 and 2000 while population grows some 40 percent.

At the same time, cities, industries and "automobilization" are taking an even bigger bite out of the earth. In fact, the area of arable land has been declining for nearly two decades in Western Europe, Eastern Europe and Eastern Asia, including China and Japan.

Factories in China, for example, are built along the coasts, where most of the good farmland is located. Closer to home, the Science Council of Canada reports "half the farmland lost to urban expansion is coming from the best one-twentieth of our farmland." It estimates 240 acres of new farmland in Canada's western provinces are needed to replace every 100 acres urbanized in the east where rainfall is higher.

STARVATION

*My granary is empty,
The rains are nowhere;
The sun is baking the grounds dry
That the soils thirst for rains just as I do
Looking beyond all I see are mirages,
The grounds roast my bare feet as I trod in search of food.*

*The green pasture is gone,
The trees are leafless;
There is no shade for my bald head.
I have scratched every inch of the ground in want
of something to fill my tummy.
As I count day and night, I pray for the rains,
Hoping that I will live to see the next day.*

*I have been living on my sour saliva for days;
My tummy grumbles and my children hunger.
They are weak, hungry, sick and restless;
they know not the tragedy — all they want is food.
It is painful, sorrowful and heartbreaking,
But there isn't much one can accomplish.*

*Let those who hear of us, bear with us
the drought has left us without.
We are homeless and hungry;
It feels like you are all alone in the world
At the mercy of famine.*

by Melisa T. Wambalaba
(In Remembering my Ethiopian Sisters and Brothers)

These losses are not being offset elsewhere. Throughout the Third World, the newest land to be farmed also tends to be the poorest. As a result, in countries such as Nigeria or Brazil, improved farming techniques have barely compensated for a steady decline in land quality, so cereal yields have not increased since 1950.

With fertile land shrinking, it stands to reason that virtually any growth in world food supplies must come from raising the productivity of land. Here, too, recent developments are discouraging.

—Diminishing returns. World food output doubled over the past generation, in part, because of a massive increase in the use of chemical fertilizers. But price hikes and mounting foreign debt have made that sort of growth considerably less likely in the Third World. And even where ferti-

lizer use stays high, as in the United States, diminishing returns are setting in, and many farmers find it no longer profitable to use more at current farm prices.

Irrigation is the other big key to improving land yields, but it too is constrained — in some places by a scarcity of fresh water, in others by lack of capital. Depletion of the Ogallala aquifer, a vast natural reservoir underlying America's southern plain states, has reduced this nation's total irrigated area by three percent. Similarly, water drawn for industrial and agricultural uses in the Beijing-Tientsin region of Northeast China lowers the aquifer several feet a year. Lack of fresh water in the Soviet Union is frustrating efforts to expand feedgrain production for that country's swelling livestock herds.

In poorer countries, much of the

cheapest irrigation is already in place and newer projects carry hefty price tags. These places could modify irrigation practices to conserve water and energy, yet it seems the world today is paying no more attention to efficient water use than it did to efficient oil use in 1970.

One other natural resource, even more vital to farmers than petroleum or water, is being exhausted at an alarming pace. A record 25 billion tons of topsoil are lost through erosion of each year, draining land of its productivity on every continent.

As land and water become more precious, and fertilizer and pesticides more expensive, how affordable will the daily meal be for the world's poorest, who already spend most of their income on food?

—Climactic change. Increasing food production further will also bring another great cost. When marginal land is asked to produce more, fragile ecosystems can be irreversibly damaged. In Africa, for example, deforestation, farming and grazing in semi-arid regions have evidently set off a round of climactic changes, actually reducing rainfall and drying out the continent.

Similar phenomena have been observed in northeastern Brazil, northwestern India and northwestern China, where growing populations cause wholesale shifts in land and deserts are expanding. In South America's Andean countries population pressures have pushed farming up mountainsides where even the casual observer can see that much of the freshly-plowed soil will be washed away, leaving only bare rocks and hungry people.

If the world is to be able to feed itself in the future, policymakers must begin to re-think that future. The solution lie in population control, restoration of soils, reforestation, the creation of an energy-efficient world.

Americans shocked and haunted by images of Ethiopians starving may find some solace in knowing that they live in one of the world's great breadbaskets, with food to share.

If present trends continue unabated, even breadbasket countries will be caught up in the breakdown of a world economy.

Special Coupon

January Coupon Special



\$5.00 off
COUPON

No Checks

CURLS \$30.00 Reg. \$35.00

Relaxers Perm \$15.00 • Reg. \$20.00

JANAE HAIRSTYLE
4711 N. Interstate 249-8440

This Coupon Good Thru January 31st

The Urban League's Low-Income Energy Assistance program serves near North/Northeast Portland.

To receive this one-time payment for heating, you must call for an appointment. You will be given date, time, and location in order to prevent your waiting in long lines or possibly not being seen after waiting. The central appointment number is 284-2776.

This year's program will operate at the following office:
Urban League LIEAP Office - 284-2776
4128 N.E. Union Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97211

A scheduled appointment is a **MUST** and the program **REQUIRES** you to bring the following:

- Proof of household income.
- Copy of current electric bill.
- Any other heating bills, with account numbers.
- Paid medical expenses.
- Proof of residency.
- Social Security numbers of family members.

284-2776

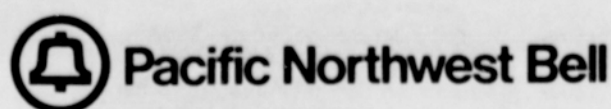
EASY LONG DISTANCE DIALING FROM PACIFIC NORTHWEST BELL.

You may have heard about EASY LONG DISTANCE DIALING from Pacific Northwest Bell. It's a service which allows you to choose from a number of long distance companies for your out-of-area calls.

Once you've subscribed, you can place long distance calls using your selected company by simply dialing "1" plus the area code and number. This will replace the multi-digit codes now required with some long distance companies.

Complete information about EASY LONG DISTANCE DIALING will be mailed to you, and we urge you to read this important material. It will explain how to sign up for the service when it becomes available to your prefix. It may be a while before the service is ready for your phone prefix, but Pacific Northwest Bell will be in touch with every customer about subscribing.

Meanwhile, if you have any questions about EASY LONG DISTANCE DIALING call us toll-free at 1-800-555-5000.

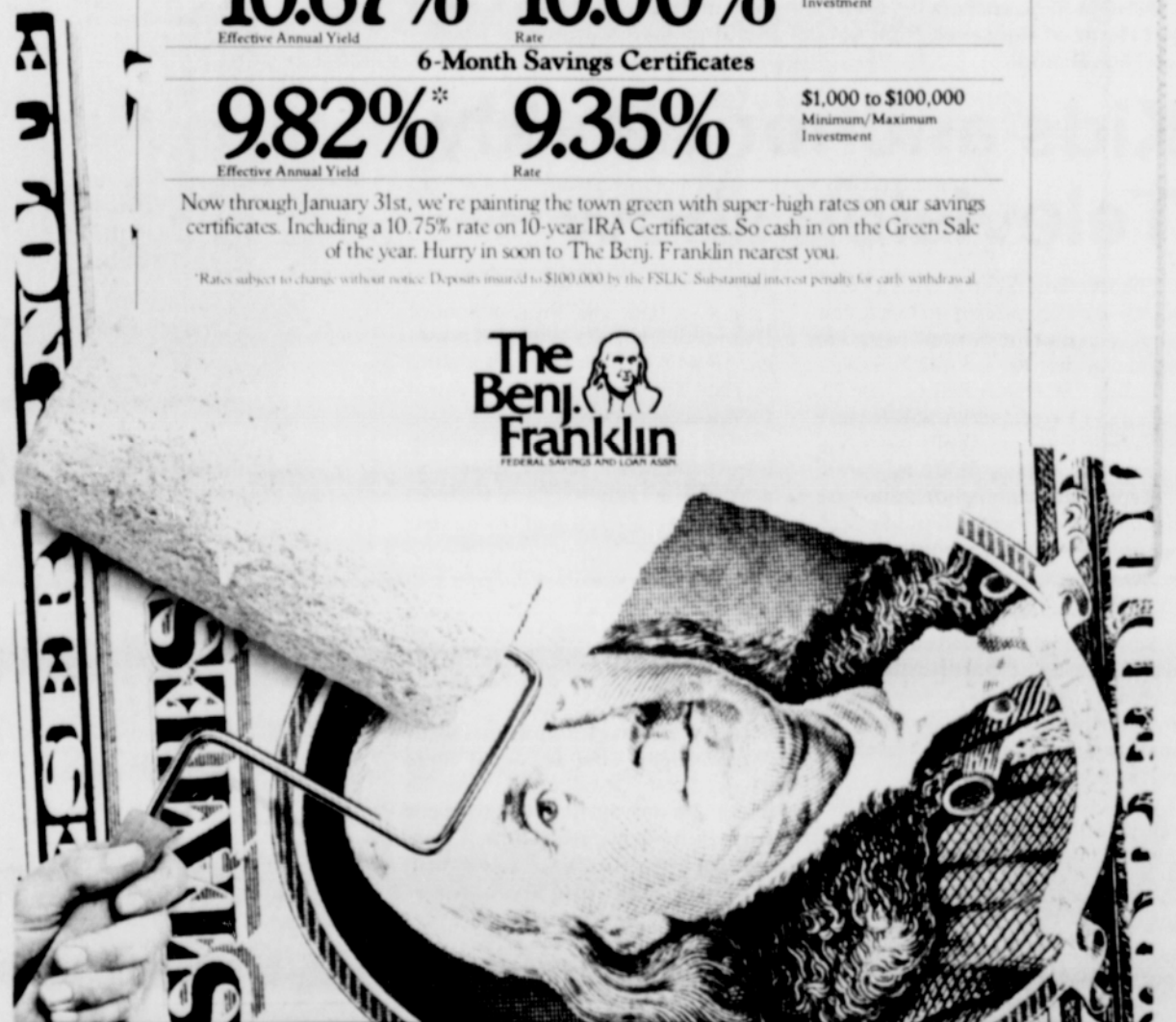


Ben's January Green Sale!

10-Year IRA Certificates		
11.51%*	10.75%	\$10 to \$100,000 Minimum/Maximum Investment
Effective Annual Yield	Rate	
2 1/2-Year Savings Certificates		
10.67%*	10.00%	\$100 to \$100,000 Minimum/Maximum Investment
Effective Annual Yield	Rate	
6-Month Savings Certificates		
9.82%*	9.35%	\$1,000 to \$100,000 Minimum/Maximum Investment
Effective Annual Yield	Rate	

Now through January 31st, we're painting the town green with super-high rates on our savings certificates. Including a 10.75% rate on 10-year IRA Certificates. So cash in on the Green Sale of the year. Hurry in soon to The Benj. Franklin nearest you.

*Rates subject to change without notice. Deposits insured to \$100,000 by the FDIC. Substantial interest penalty for early withdrawal.



Over 30 offices in the greater Portland area to serve you.