Hopkins Releases Survey of Farm Families on Relief

"Human conservation is as important as soil conservation in any program for reconstructing American agricultural life," Harry L. Hopkins, Works Progress Administrator, said today in releasing a report prepared by his Division of Social Research on "Farmers on Relief and Rehabilitation."

He recommended a federally financed, nationally coordinated, long-time program of agricultural reconstruction, planned on a regional basis.

"Some 2,000,000 families of farmers and farm laborers received emergency assistance from the Federal government during the depression," Mr. Hopkins said. "Study of typical families of this group shows that farming must be improved both as a source of income and as a way of living.

"We thought that we were dealing with the effects of the depression but when we became familiar with the situation of farm families on relief we saw that the need of many of them was long standing. Rural life had been on the decline for years before the financial crash, accumulating a large group of low income farmers of which the general public was mostly unaware."
"These farmers had led a precarious existence for years and the depression was only the last straw in an accumulation of troubles outside their control. Our experience with rural relief since 1933 shows that continued national neglect of these maladjustments will cost more in the long run than their solution."

The report released today by Mr. Hopkins is based on a study of the relief case records of about 53,000 farm operator and farm laborer families in 300 counties, receiving relief grants or rehabilitation advances in 1935. The counties were representative of 30 States and of 9 agricultural areas, and the families studied are believed typical of all farm families on relief in the same States and areas. The study was directed by Corrington Gill, Assistant Works Progress Administrator, and conducted under the immediate supervision of Howard B. Myers, Director of the WPA Division of Social Research, and of T. J. Wooster, Jr., Coordinator of Rural Research. The report was written by Berta Asch and A. R. Hanges.

The report cited farming on poor land, excess birth rates in poor land areas, overcropping and other soil erosive practices, the small size of farms in areas where only large-scale methods are profitable, the one-crop system, the tenancy system especially as found in the South, over-capitalization of farms in boom years, the decline of mining, lumbering, and other rural industries, and the low wages paid to farm laborers as contributing to the dependency of farm families.

Farm families on relief were concentrated in drought and poor land areas. More than half of the farm families receiving aid in June, 1935, were located in 14 States which contained only one-fourth of all
farms in the United States. New Mexico and South Dakota had the heaviest relief loads, with about one-third of their farmers receiving aid. Next in order were North Dakota, Oklahoma, Colorado, Kentucky, Florida, Idaho, Montana, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, South Carolina, and Wyoming, with from 10 to 27 per cent of their farmers on relief or rehabilitation rolls. In the country as a whole, the proportion of all farmers on relief or rehabilitation averaged nine per cent.

"The concentration of relief in these States primarily reflects the effects of the 1934 drought and the long-standing ills of the Appalachian-Ozark area with its poor soil and abandoned industries," the report states.

Improvement in general economic conditions in 1935 failed to reach many of the farmers on relief or was not sufficient to offset the effects of the 1934 drought and other factors causing rural distress, the study showed. Although the number of farm operator families receiving Federal assistance dropped from 693,000 in February, 1935, to 282,000 in October, 1935, many of those who had left the relief rolls during the farm season had to reapply for aid in the last months of the year and December rolls showed an increase over October.

More than 200,000 farm operator families were accepted for aid by Federal Emergency Relief Administration agencies alone between June 30, 1935, and January 1, 1936, and four out of five of these were former relief cases returning to the rolls. Crop failures and loss of livestock were the reasons most frequently reported for applying for relief. Loss of earnings from employment was the second most important reason given—seasonal employment from which farmers picked out their farm income had
come to an end, or earnings were so low that supplementary relief was re-
quired.

Other families that were added to relief rolls had been existing on savings for some time and listed exhaustion of these resources as their reason for applying. Increased needs with the approach of winter, loss of assistance from relatives and friends, failure of landlords to continue advances to croppers after the cotton harvest, appropriation of crop returns by creditors, and destruction of property by local floods were other reasons listed in opening of relief cases.

Most of the farmers on relief were tenants, the study showed. In every area there were proportionately more tenant farmers than farm owners on relief, and in both the Eastern and Western Cotton Areas there were proportionately more sharecroppers than other types of tenants on relief and rehabilitation rolls.

Most of the farmers on relief were still operating their farms. This was true of owners and tenants in all areas except the Eastern Cotton Belt. In that area most of the sharecroppers on relief had been displaced from their farms.

Referring to the destitution of sharecroppers and other cotton tenants, the report states:

"Assuming a permanently decreased demand for cotton, the tenant system of the South had produced a 'stranded' population, a group of landless people with undeveloped capacities, who, unless some scheme for rehabilitation is devised, will be permanently in need of public assistance."
A striking finding was the small size of acreages operated by farmers on relief. Among farm owners the acreages operated by those on relief were less than one-third of the average size of all owner-operated farms in the areas. Farms of tenants on relief were also much smaller than the average tenant farm. At the same time the farmers on relief had larger families to support than did those in the general farm population.

Most of the farm laborers studied were unemployed and many of them had moved from the open country to the villages in search of better opportunities for employment or relief. Their usual low earnings were reflected in the fact that they had remained off relief for only three months, on the average, after losing their last farm labor jobs.

While unemployed farm laborers or displaced tenants were leaving the country for the villages in some areas, a back-to-the-land movement was taking place in the regions of poorest soil - the Appalachian-Ozark and Lake States Cut-Over areas. Unemployed non-farm workers drifted back to the land and attempted unsuccessfully to make a living as farmers.

Rehabilitation of the farmers on relief cannot be accomplished in a few months but is a step-by-step process, in the opinion of the authors of the report:

"The more fundamental measures for building an agrarian civilization of the highest order in the United States are evidently long-time measures, not planned for quick results. This is especially true of tenancy reform, of programs for crop control, of the development of a population policy, and of the improvement of the rural standard of living and of rural institutions."
Guided migration is stressed as an essential part of a program for conserving human values in rural America. The government cannot force farmers to move from blighted areas, the report points out, but it can encourage and help those who wish to move.

"Poor land in itself is a sufficient hazard to farming, but when, as in the Appalachian-Ozark highlands and parts of the Cotton Areas, it is coupled with an excessive birth rate, the problem is greatly aggravated, and individual and family suffering multiplied," the report continues.

"In the past the high birth rate served to populate new areas and the cities. But desirable free homestead land was exhausted years ago and the covered wagon is no longer a means of escape from an overcrowded shack in the hills. The depression shut off the opportunity to make a living by migrating to cities and towns. There was nothing for the surplus population to do but remain, crowding into an already overcrowded agriculture. In these areas large numbers of youth mature without substantial opportunity.

"Guidance out of these areas must take the form of an intensive search for areas of opportunity wherever they exist, or can be created. The advice of the agricultural expert should be substituted for that of the speculator in worthless and semi-worthless farm lands."