

Crossing the Agricultural Rubicon

by John H. Tanton

In a recent press release by the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an offhand remark was made about how the United States “feeds millions of people around the world.” Not for much longer.

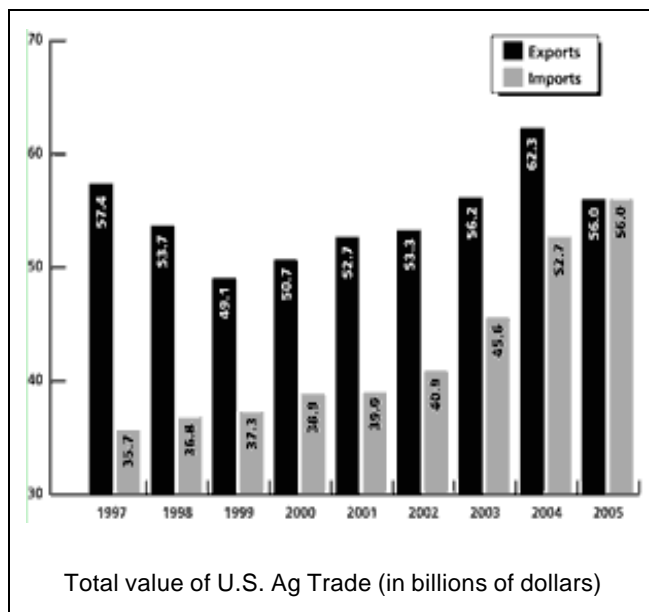
As the accompanying graph shows, importation of food, measured in dollars, has risen steadily over the past decade, and is projected by the Department of Agriculture¹ to equal net exports for 2005! This constitutes crossing a Rubicon of immense proportions, not just the tiny stream that Caesar forded in 49 B.C. on his way to conquering Pompey and Rome.

In terms of food calories the exports are still positive: we ship out immense quantities of corn, wheat, soybeans, etc. But much of this export crop is fed to animals or processed into food that we then re-import as higher-value agricultural products. We also import grapes from Chile and oranges from Israel among many other items. It is the *dollar* value of imports that is projected to be equal to exports for 2005.

The United States currently consumes about two-thirds of the food that we produce. Trends are in place that over time will decrease our exports and increase our imports. As population grows more agricultural land will be converted to non-agricultural uses – building more roads, hospitals, schools, parking lots, shopping malls, etc. This constitutes a downward pressure on the food-producing base. And, of course, more people will eat more.

At the same time an expanding population will import more food. According to the USDA, “...demand for imported food...roughly tracks U.S. population growth over time.”²

The net result will be the gradual decline of our agricultural trade surpluses which have been one of the



few bright spots in our current balance of trade accounting. We are already in energy deficit (we import 12 million of the 20 million barrels of oil we burn each day).³ And now we have a diminishing agricultural exchange surplus with which to buy fuel and other commodities necessary to facilitate that very agriculture, along with other activities.

Predictably, this watershed event went virtually unnoticed in the media. As everyone knows, America is the breadbasket of the world! Or at least we have been.

NOTES

- <http://www.michiganfarmbureau.com/farmnews/transform.php?xml=20050215/imports.xml>
- <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/reports/erssor/trade/aes-bb/2004/aes44.pdf>
- <http://thesocialcontract.com/cgi-bin/showarticle.pl?articleID=1295&terms=>

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