

WORLD & NATION

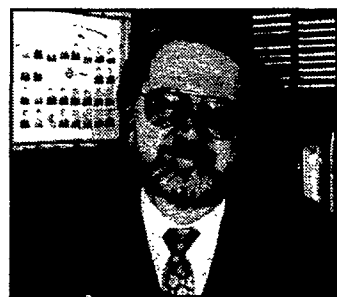
Leaders say terrorists may target U.S. agriculture

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — People may think of anything taking place before Sept. 11 as "the good old days."

Since the terror attacks of that day, America is on uncertain footing on many

Thoughts to Consider



EDWIN SULEWSKI
Funeral Director

When a pet dies what can I do for my child?

A child may be quite upset when a pet dies. One way you can help is to plan a ceremony with the child for saying goodbye. A pet funeral gives the child a feeling of being in control and allows him to express some feelings about the loss. Finding a box to place the pet in, digging a grave and holding a ceremony also satisfies a child's natural curiosity about the physical aspects of death. When a pet dies a child may continue to be sad, for several days then, as a rule, they turn their attention to other matters. Listen to your child when he expresses his feelings and be available to answer any questions your child might have.

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fronts. The footing is more uncertain in areas where things were taken pretty much for granted. One of those areas is food.

The new Cabinet-level Office for Homeland Security has protection of the nation's food supply as one of its priorities. Since Sept. 11, that has become a concern as well of Catholic and other rural-life advocates.

Robert Gronski, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference's expert on biotechnology, is part of a group asked to draft a statement on the vulnerability of America's concentrated livestock industry.

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference is a member of the Global Safe Food Alliance, which, Gronski said, "up to this point was concerned with food-borne diseases. Now we're concerned about external attacks on our food system."

In an interview, Gronski said one area he may explore in drafting the statement is the close confinement of animals on many corporate farms, suggesting they could be more easily susceptible to a virus or disease. Another area to consider is the narrowing of genetic lines of livestock used in the U.S. meat industry "so everything can be standardized," he said.

"I would argue for greater biodiversity," Gronski added. "The best way to do that is to have your different herds and flocks managed by different people — and not (have) the same kind of animal, but different varieties."

"I don't know if we can ever get back to that," he confessed. "We might have gotten ourselves into a bind."

Crop concentration can be just as serious, according to Mary Hendrickson, a professor of rural sociology at the University of Missouri.

In Nebraska, she said, one used to be able to find all manner of crops on the rolling plains. "Now all you see are corn and soybeans" she added.

Similarly, Hendrickson said, just two firms control 70 percent of the grain shipped between the United States and other nations. Were that link to be interrupted, "we could be in for a serious time."

Concentration also hits the consumer at the cash register. Five grocery chains — Wal-Mart, Kroger, Safeway, Albertson's and the Royal Ahold-owned supermarkets in the East — collect 42 to 48 cents of every American food dollar.

"A produce truck coming up from Florida used to go to small networks of wholesalers," Hendrickson said. "Now it goes on-

ly to the Kroger distribution center."

She added, "We've created a big, monstrous spider web instead of lots of little spider webs ... and it's easier to tear down a few spider webs than a thousand."

Hendrickson said farmers need to figure out how to change to a more sustainable form of agriculture.

"Nobody changes course midstream," Hendrickson said of farmers. Even if they wanted to diversify, changes would have to come in increments. It would take three years, she added, before a farm could be certified as "organic" for its crop growing and land management practices.

The concern over how to care for crops heightened after the Federal Aviation Administration grounded all crop-dusting planes twice since Sept. 11, after evidence was found linking suspected terrorists to such planes. The fear was less that a terrorist would spread some poisonous toxin on a field, Hendrickson said, but that a terrorist would take the crop-duster into an urban area and empty the contents of his tanks on a large group of people.

A congressionally mandated panel assembled to assess the potential threat of terrorists using weapons of mass destruction in the United States issued a report early this year in which it said: "A concerted biological attack against an agricultural target offers terrorists a virtually risk-free form of assault, which has a high probability of success."

According to Jane's, a military and defense publishing organization, the 2001 fis-

cal year budget contained \$1.56 billion to augment homeland defenses against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear attacks, more than double the \$645 million allocated in fiscal 1998.

Of that \$1.56 billion, \$39.8 million was earmarked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to determine the safety of America's food supply from terrorist attack. "This concern has been generated by a growing realization that ... attacks against livestock and the food chain are substantially easier and less risky to carry out than those directed at civilian targets," Jane's said last February.

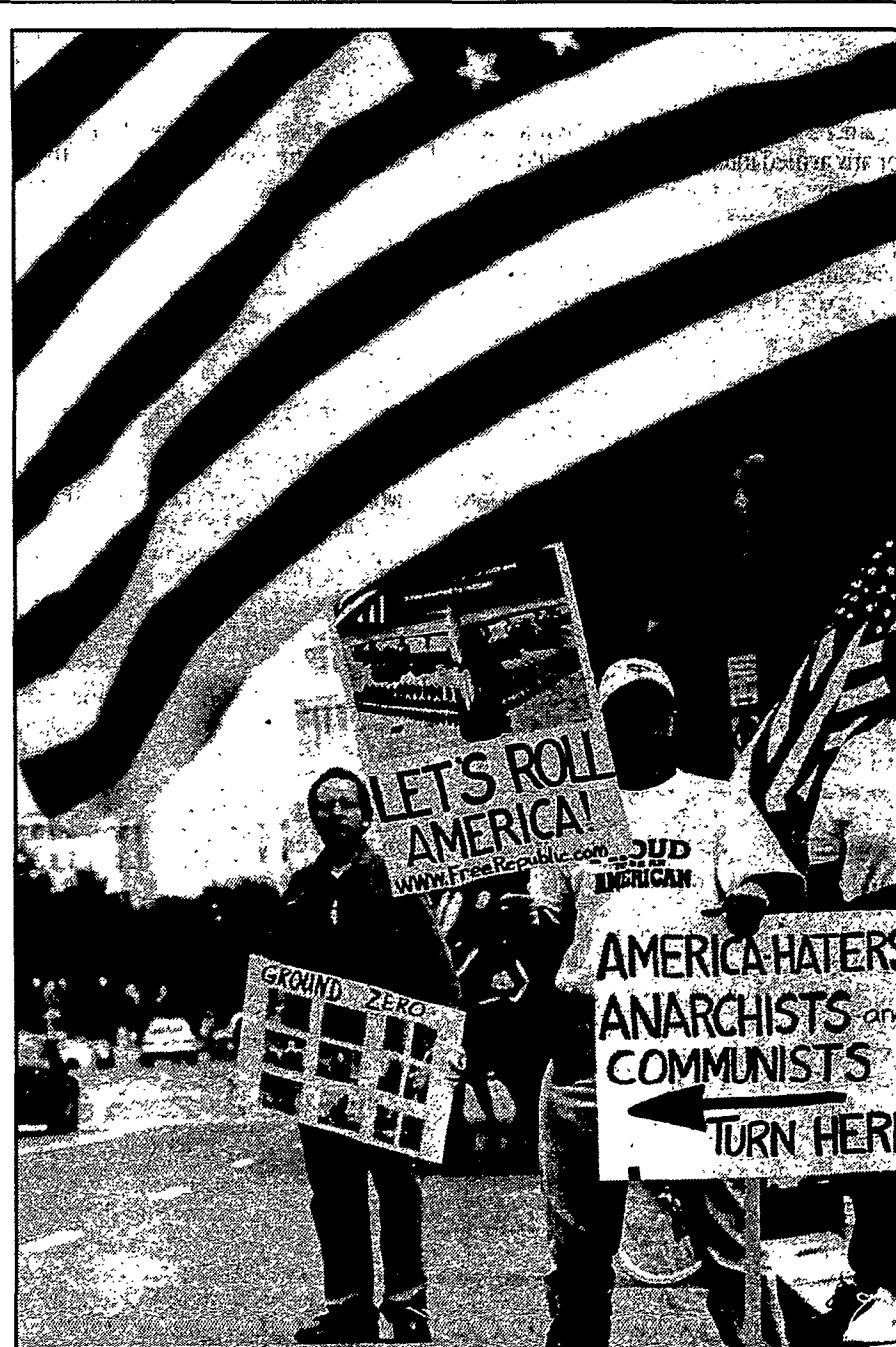
When related food industries and suppliers are thrown in, agriculture counts for one of every six dollars of the gross domestic product, Jane's added.

Lorette Picciano has worked on food security issues since 1980, first with Bread for the World, the Christian citizens' anti-hunger lobby, and later with a group called Interfaith Action for Economic Justice.

Now a policy expert for the Washington-based Rural Coalition, Picciano said that, in foreign policy, "we can't use food as a weapon, but make sure needs are met," even among those under the rule of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Domestically, she said, reserves need to be built up to guard against price fluctuations, which could be damaging to consumer confidence in the economy.

"In biblical times," Picciano said, "in good times you put it away, in bad times you take it out."



Nancy Wiehac/CNS

A counter-approach

Counter-demonstrators peer down Pennsylvania Avenue watching for anti-war activists to march up the street in Washington Sept. 29. A handful of counter-demonstrators met with thousands of peace activists as they marched to the U.S. Capitol urging the government not to respond with force to the Sept. 11 attacks.

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