

Coast's Farm Workers Gain In Job Fight With Machines

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LOS ANGELES, Feb. 10 — Backed by unexpectedly strong support from the Carter Administration, supporters of Mexican-American farm workers whose jobs are threatened by mechanical harvesting systems appear to be making headway in efforts to slow the development of such machines.

A California Superior Court judge ruled last week that the University of California must participate in a trial to defend charges that it has unlawfully subsidized the development of labor-saving agricultural machines that benefit private agribusiness concerns.

The ruling followed by less than a week a speech by Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland in which he strengthened a month-old policy statement declaring that as a general rule the Agriculture Department would not finance farm research whose major impact would be "the replacing of an adequate and willing work force with machines."

A federally financed legal aid group, California Rural Legal Assistance, brought the suit against the university, whose Davis campus near San Francisco has for many years been regarded as one of the world's most successful developers of mechanical harvesters.

Tomato-Picking Machines

Researchers at Davis, for example, have developed a family of huge, wheeled machines that pick canning tomatoes using a small fraction of the manpower required when the picking was done by hand. Mechanical harvesters have also been developed for other crops, and now Davis researchers are further expanding the technology to include development of machines to harvest lettuce and wine grapes.

Among other things, California Rural Legal Assistance charged in its suit that the university research benefited a relatively few farming organizations because it tailored its research project to their needs. It also accused several university regents of conflicts of interests because they had direct or indirect ties to companies involved in food production.

Attorneys for the university have denied the allegations made in the suit and sought to have it dismissed, contending that the university had a lawful right to choose what field of research it pursued and defending its agricultural studies as a valid area of academic research in seeking to improve the productivity of commercial agriculture.

But at last week's hearing, Superior Court Judge Spurgeon Avakian of Alameda County ruled that the allegations of outside influence on university research decisions were substantive enough to bring the case to trial. The trial

is not expected to begin until late this year.

The debate over whether Government money should be used to help underwrite development of labor-saving agricultural machinery is occurring against a backdrop of economic change in California farming. The state leads all others in total output of agricultural products.

Under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers Of America, workers and many of the state's agribusiness concerns last year won pay increases of more than 40 percent, to \$5 an hour for basic unskilled labor, and many are scheduled under union contracts to receive further increases, to \$6 or more this year.

Many farmers have asserted that, combined with higher costs for fringe benefits, labor costs have become so high that the California farmers cannot compete with farmers in other states, Mexico and central America. As a result, they say there is a growing economic incentive to invest in mechanical harvesting devices and to adapt them to crops that now must be picked by hand.

Mr. Chavez calls the mechanical harvesters "monsters" and has been seeking help from his political supporters to block their further development.

Role of Private Business

Some farmers assert that it is now already a moot point whether Government funds should be spent to underwrite development of the machines because private business is moving actively into the market.

The university is getting \$2 million a year in Federal funds for mechanization, an officer of the California Farm Bureau said in an interview last week. "When you consider how fast labor is going up, that's a pittance," he said. "The private sector will just move in and develop the machines regardless of what the university does; you can already see that in some crops, like fresh market tomatoes."

In a Jan. 31 speech at Reston, Va., Mr. Bergland said that his department would not support research "where careful review and analysis clearly indicates that the direct and immediate benefits will go to a relative few and a limited number of locales while neither serving the national interests nor benefiting the general public."

He added, "We will not put Federal money into research where, other factors being equal or neutral, the major effect of the research will be the replacing of an adequate and willing work force with machines."

Charles Hess, dean of agriculture and environmental science at the Davis campus, issued a statement saying that the Federal policy "runs counter to needs for more food in many parts of the world."

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