
This is one of a series of books dealing with the trends of American productivity in the twentieth century. It attempts to gather within one volume analysis of (a) output, (b) a review of "the newer nutrition," (c) farm employment and farm productivity, and (d) the place of agriculture in the nation's economy. Emphasis is placed upon the "peculiarities of agricultural enterprise"; upon "the size and composition of farm output"; upon "agriculture as the source of the nation's food supply"; upon "the history of technological changes in agriculture"; upon "estimates of agricultural employment"; and upon "the outlook for agriculture as a segment of the nation's economy" (Preface).

Agricultural statistics of the United States Department of Agriculture and census records are the main sources from which data were secured for this analysis. Where the authors found too few data to permit the use of methods of statistical analysis which were adapted to industry, they made assumptions permitting the creation of substitute data. Agricultural statistics have long been the statistician's guessing ground. This frontal attack on their inherent weaknesses may prove to be the needed push to aid those who strive for greater adequacy and reliability of agricultural statistics.

Having defined output (p. 13) as "consisting of those products which are not consumed in further processing within agriculture but are available for consumption elsewhere," the authors construct an index of total agricultural output from yearly production (called "output," p. 333) and seasonal prices so that their "output" as used is a value product.

After construction of this "new index of agricultural output" (p. 14), they use the term interchangeably with the following terms: "physical volume" (p. 19), "net farm output" (p. 19), "volume" (p. 41), "output in quantity terms only" (p. 353), "net output" (p. 49), "net values" (p. 49), "gross income" (p. 49), and "index" (p. 111); then they say, "We are not dealing with income estimates" (p. 96).

Those readers who are familiar with indices of (a) physical volume and (b) price changes will need to use special care in their interpretation of all the "output" trends in this book, since they are indices of value product. A few comparative trends of physical volume and of prices would have aided reader interpretation.

The discussion of elasticity (p. 304) implies that income elasticity of demand is the only significant phase of this relationship. It would seem desirable to lay some stress on elasticity of supply in a discussion of farmer problems. The authors seem to favor elasticity of demand and more specifically "income elasticity of demand." Some of their analyses of farm labor should be taken with caution. Here the weaknesses of entering the subject "from without" are especially apparent. The self-employed farmer and his family dominate the farm labor situation, making it impossible to compare the labor inputs of agriculture with those of manufacturing.

There is no method for separating "work done" from "available labor supply," or for determining when a farmer is "producing" and when he is "enjoying the fruits of his labors." As compiled, the report indicates that much of the farm labor released by labor-saving equipment has been diverted to livestock production where (if labor on feed crops is included) less human food results from a given input of labor.

Conclusions based on a twenty-year period dominated by the thirties are likewise subject to error. Ending the analysis in 1939 means that the amazing volume of farm production in the subsequent three years was omitted. Its effects upon some of the "trends" would be disturbing.

This study is especially useful (a) in pointing to the shortcomings of agricultural statistics and (b) in suggesting how far removed are the ways of farmers from the ways of industrialists. Many of the farm problems of the last twenty-five years stand as special cases of the failure in high places and speed the return of decision-making to those whose incomes are directly affected.

This is a sobering book in the attempted range of its content, in its stress on the unknowns in the agricultural picture, and in some of its implications for the future. If farmers as commercial producers are to survive in a fast-moving modern world they need to consider these things.

R. T. Burdick

Colorado State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts