

University challenged over 'agribusiness' connections

David Dickson contributes his third weekly article on science in the American West with a report on farm workers in California, who are suing university officials over the social consequences of agricultural research

EARLY next month a county court in California will begin hearings on charges that have been brought against the University of California, claiming that it has carried out agricultural research leading to a variety of undesirable social consequences. These include the disappearance of harvest-time jobs as a result of increased automation, the shift from small family farms to large-scale 'agribusinesses', and the enrichment of corporate stock-holders out of public pockets.

A suit filed by a publically-financed group, California Rural Legal Assistance, on behalf of a number of farmworkers, concentrates in particular on the way that university research has contributed to the growth of mechanised agriculture in the state, resulting, the group claims, in extensive job dislocation and unemployment.

The suit demands that such research be stopped. And it also accuses senior members of the university and its Board of Regents of a conflict of interest over their connections with large food-producing corporations which, it is claimed, have been the principal beneficiaries of state- and federally-financed research.

The university, in response, has strongly denied any impropriety. In a statement issued at the end of last week, university counsel Mr Donald C. Reidhaar said that if the suit succeeded, it would prevent the university from carrying out research which might result in harm to certain people and in help to others.

"A basic mission of the university is research and the creation of new knowledge. Acceptance of the plaintiff's proposition would require the elimination of all research with any potential practical application," Mr Reidhaar said.

Research workers at the University of California have been engaged for more than a hundred years in developing techniques to raise agricultural production; ironically one of the university's first major political crises involved the claim that it was not doing enough of practical assistance to local agriculture.

Much of this research has been related to mechanising traditional agricultural practices, often with state support. In the mid-1960s, for example, the university was awarded an annual grant of \$150,000 by the state legisla-

ture to carry out research into automated farm machinery, following the phasing-out of a programme to bring farm labourers across the border from Mexico at peak harvesting time.

Yet not everyone has appreciated—or benefitted from—these changes. In tomato growing, for example, research at the university's Davis campus has led to developments ranging from automated picking and sorting machines, to a strain of "square tomato" whose thick skin protects it during mechanical processing; but many small farmers who could not afford the expensive new equipment have been forced out of business, while tomato harvesting no longer provides summer-time work for many thousands of migratory workers.

Strong opposition to the increasing automation of agriculture in California—as well as to the university's role in encouraging this process—has come from the United Farm Workers, the union established in the early 1970s after several bloody confrontations with growers. The union is concerned, for example, that many farm owners have used the elimination of jobs to offset the increased wages that the union has been able to negotiate for its members.

"We are not against mechanisation, but do not think that the taxpayer should pay twice, first for the univer-

sity research and then for the increased unemployment, welfare and social service costs" says union official Mack Lyons. Last year the union's convention passed a resolution demanding a moratorium on future research in agricultural mechanisation until it had been assured that the interests of farm workers would be protected.

The legal challenge, however, has come not from the union, but from a group of attorneys working for an organisation set up on state and federal funds to protect the rights of farm workers. In a suit filed in the Alameda County Court, it is demanded that the university stop all research on any agricultural mechanisation process that conveys has "a special economic benefit to narrow, private agribusiness interests at the expense of farmworkers, small family farmers, consumers, taxpayers and the quality of rural life".

By using tax money to benefit a small group of private corporations and by acting out of individual economic self-interest, the plaintiffs claim that the university and various named members of its Board of Regents have acted contrary to the state constitution, which requires that the university be administered as a public trust for the benefit of all Californians, free of political influence.

"We are questioning who benefits from the technological changes resulting from this research, who gets hurt—and who takes the decisions. In this type of situation we feel that there should be an open decision-making pro-



"The machine won't strike, it will work when the growers want it to work"

cess before money is spent on research," says Mr Al H. Meyerhoff, one of the attorneys who have filed the suit on behalf of nineteen farmworkers and the California Agrarian Action Project.

"The increasing monopoly over agricultural production of large food-producing corporations is being facilitated by research and development work at public universities initially established, under the land grants colleges legislation, to help small farmers. We feel these institutions should not be contributing to the problems that these farmers face."

The university strongly denies charges that the results of its agricultural research programmes have been socially detrimental. In particular, according to university staff:

- although mechanisation has resulted in declining employment in some areas, this has been largely compensated for both by the introduction of new jobs in other areas, and by other employment opportunities brought about by general increases in agricultural productivity;

- rather than merely benefitting large corporate producers, the technological developments arising from university research have been of general benefit to the community, the advantages of increased productivity for example being passed on through lower food prices;

- and the university is also challenging whether it should have any particular responsibility for the social consequences of its research programmes, or whether this responsibility should not be shared by the whole community.

"The university's responsibility is to create new knowledge or information, to develop new ways to produce food as efficiently as possible, and to be aware of new developments, and so forth. But in terms of the conflict of social goals, that's not only *our* job, but the job of society, of the legislature." Professor Charles Hess, dean of the college of agricultural and environmental sciences, said in a recent interview.

Others at the university strongly support this view, although many admit that the automated machinery that they have developed has been made particularly attractive to local growers by the increasing strength and militant tactics of unionised farmworkers.

"Automatic lettuce harvesters, for example, developed at the university have been available for some time, but have not been widely taken up for a number of reasons, in particular cost. But I don't know how many more lettuce strikes we will have before something happens," says Dr William Chancellor, professor of agricultural engineering at the university of Cali-

fornia's Davis campus.

From the union's standpoint, increasing mechanisation is a direct threat to its bargaining capabilities. One tomato grower near Sacramento, the target of an unsuccessful UFW campaign in 1975, subsequently bought an electronic tomato sorter for \$200,000, and was able to reduce his work force from 100 to 28, thus getting rid of "all the troublemakers". As one university staff member has been quoted as saying, "the machine won't strike, it will work when the growers want it to work".

The farmworkers have already received considerable support in their fight against mechanisation from members of the state legislature. At the request of one state representative, for example, the state accounting office is already carrying out an audit of the university's research activities to see if it reveals any "improprieties".

But neither has the university been totally insensitive to its criticisms. In addition to publicising the social value of its research, the university points out that the amount of research into agricultural mechanisation is being decreased, with emphasis shifting, for example, to methods for improving the biological productivity of crops.

The university is also both carrying out research and offering retraining courses aimed at the problems faced by farmworkers who lose their jobs as a result of automation. "We have been accused about not caring about the problems that mechanisation-causes; but we are now looking at these too," says Dr Chancellor.

In responding to the charges made by the legal aid group, however, the university has denied that there is anything improper in the close links that it has established with private industry; claims that such links result in an "inordinate influence" on research policy are, it says, subjective assessments based on a particular political viewpoint.

Critics remain unconvinced. They blame the major food producers for the social problems of US agricultural workers—as well as the declining flavour of US food—and accuse the University of California (as well as universities playing similar roles in other states) of direct collaboration in this process.

"It belongs to society as a whole to decide what help people affected by agricultural developments should get, and how much. We should not be expected to do this on our own," says one university spokesman. "We believe that it is a travesty for the government to use tax money, in the form of research grants, to force people out of work and drive small family farmers off the land," says Mr. Meyerhoff. □

Professional bodies lobby to protect US science budget

QUOTING a 25% drop in the proportion of the federal budget devoted to basic research between 1968 and 1978, 40 US scientific societies and higher education associations last week issued a joint statement supporting President Carter's bid for a significant increase in support for basic research in the fiscal year 1980.

The statement is critical of the administration's decision to request virtually no increase in funding for biomedical research through the National Institutes of Health, pointing out that this will mean a decrease of almost 50% in the number of new competitive research grants available.

Apart from this, however, the various organisations put their voices solidly behind President Carter's request for a 9% increase in basic research funding—even accepting that this will be barely sufficient to keep up with inflation—and urges Congress to do the same.

So far, the Congressional response to the budget request submitted in January has been relatively good. The Senate budget committee, for example, having taken a detailed look at the requested science budget, has recommended that it be accepted almost in full, although suggesting cuts in virtually all other areas of public spending.

But there may well be stormy weather ahead. The House of Representatives, for example, in authorising a budget for the National Science Foundation close to the \$1,000 million requested, accepted by 219 votes to 174 an amendment reducing funds for biological, behavioural and social sciences research (and aimed primarily at the last of these) by \$14 million; last year a comparable amendment was rejected 174 to 229.

Immediate cause for concern are imminent floor debates on broad budget resolutions in both the Senate and the House, with various proposals that could affect science funding. A further test will come when key appropriations subcommittees meet to decide on agency budgets later next month.

Keen to prevent a repeat of last year, when a substantial increase in funding for basic research requested by President Carter was cut back by Congressional committees to a level—apart from the NIH—scarcely above inflation, the research community has been busy putting its lobbying act together in Washington.

In issuing a joint statement, the