

President, in Iowa, Assures Farmers on Import Curbs

Says He Is Prepared to Limit Foreign Meat Products and Pledges No Fast Changes in Dairy Restrictions

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SIoux CITY, Iowa, Oct. 31— President Ford, beginning his last campaign tour to help stem Republican losses in Tuesday's election, assured farmers today that he was prepared to limit beef imports that threaten to keep down cattle prices.

Mr. Ford announced what he described as three policy decisions at an airport rally for Representative Wiley Mayne, one of the farm belt Republicans who is reported trailing a Democratic challenger, partly because of the agricultural policies of former President Nixon and of President Ford. Mr. Mayne has been close to both Presidents.

"I would not come to Sioux City, the heart of the slaughter livestock industry, and not say a word about the production of meat," Mr. Ford said. "I have today made three policy decisions which I believe will relieve some of the anxiety in the industry and restore confidence among producers so that the industry can again become profitable."

"First," he said, "this Administration intends to carry out the intent of the meat import law. If imports of meat subject to the meat import law threaten to pick up markedly during the next year and the Agriculture Department's estimates of 1975 imports exceed the trigger level under the meat import law, I will either impose quotas or negotiate voluntary export restraint agreements with foreign suppliers."

Mr. Ford made this promise after several recent face-to-face meetings with cattle producers, the last yesterday at the White House. The position of the growers, who are upset by declining prices to farmers, is that retail beef prices have not shown a similar decline but continue at a high level, with the increased profits going to middlemen.

Yearly Import Quotas

At the first of the year, the President decides on a level of import quotas that is calculated not to drive down to a significant degree the domestic price of live cattle.

Former President Nixon, in an effort to slow inflation, virtually eliminated import quotas on many classes of beef, and Mr. Ford has been under pressure by cattle producers to restore many of those quotas.

Thus, Mr. Ford, in effect, said today he would do so if he finds that the imports are depressing prices to American farmers.

Mr. Ford said his second decision was that he would take no action to change the present system of dairy import quotas "without a thorough review of market conditions and full opportunity for our dairy producers to be heard."

Because of rising retail prices

of milk and milk products, Mr. Ford has been under pressure by consumer groups to relax imports. However, he has privately assured milk producers before today that he would take no such steps without giving the producers every opportunity to register their opposition.

The third step was along the same line.

"The Administration is not going to permit foreign dairy producers to compete against American dairymen in the U.S. market with subsidized products," he said. "If the Europeans reinstate their export subsidies of dairy products directed at this market, I will impose countervailing duties on these products."

This statement was intended to quiet concern among American dairy producers that some European countries are undercutting prices on the international market by subsidizing their own producers.

Increased Purchases

In addition to these steps, Mr. Ford said, he has asked Agriculture Secretary Earl L. Butz to see whether there is a way of increasing government purchases of beef for the national school lunch program, which also would tend to keep prices up by increasing consumption.

Mr. Ford's speech here today pointed up the dilemma that has faced him in his efforts this year to mitigate what he and his advisers have acknowledged to be a dismal prospectus for many Republican candidates.

While his assurances may have been of some comfort to farmers, the prospects of limiting supply through higher import quotas could not be expected to cheer consumers, who have seen food prices rise for many months.

A White House official said the President's decision on meat imports stemmed largely from fears within the American cattle industry that Australia was about to dump a large amount of beef on the American market, partly because of export restrictions in Japan and other countries.

His effort to have Mr. Mayne was indicative of the broader effort he is making to stop what appeared to be the erosion of an important bloc of Republican support that he and former President Richard M. Nixon had enjoyed in Congress.

Nixon's 1966 Tour

Mr. Nixon came to this district, Iowa's Sixth, in 1966 to speak for Mr. Mayne, who was challenging a Democratic incumbent. Mr. Nixon was traveling the country in behalf of Republican candidates that year and laying the groundwork for his own election to the Presidency.