Finally, farmers and ranchers should not be asked to increase the production of agricultural products unless and until the government can guarantee that the extra production can be used and marketed at profitable levels without causing future drops in prices.

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FARMER BROWN INC.—PROMISE OF PROFIT LURES MORE BIG CORPORATIONS INTO MASS AGRICULTURE; SOME SAY "FACTORY" METHODS CAN LOWER FOOD PRICES; MANY FAMILY FARMS FAIL; TIME-MOTION IN THE CORNFIELDS

(By John A. Prestbo)

KANSAS CITY.—CBK Industries Inc. has decided to get out of the women's apparel business. Also the foreign film, asphalt and label-printing businesses. Instead, it's taking up the unlikely business of farming.

It wasn't nostalgia for the soil that prompted executives of the Kansas City-based "conglomerate" company this year to begin swapping CBK's sundry manufacturing and distribution facilities for corn and soybean acreage. They are simply searching for bigger profits, and they expect to find them in farming.

This may sound surprising at a time when farmers complain bitterly about low prices for their products and when financial failures are steadily reducing the number of U.S. farms. But a growing number of companies are joining CBK in committing all or part of their resources to farming for profit.

The trend is based on a belief that labor-saving machinery and potent new fertilizers and pesticides now make it possible to produce crops in greater quantity and at lower cost than ever before—for those who have the money or credit to buy good land and sophisticated equipment and the know-how to use them efficiently. CBK says its studies show that cost-conscious management of commercial farming operations could reap profits "well above the average on invested capital."

FADING FAMILY FARMS

Some farm economists say the recent growth of corporate involvement in farming is just the start of a broad-scale conversion of agriculture to a profit-oriented industry. They foresee the day when the old family farm will fade into extinction and corporations will mass produce the nation's food as efficiently and impersonally as they today produce its autos and vacuum cleaners. Federal farm planners say privately that eventually the U.S. will need only about 500,000 farms, compared with today's 3,176,000, and that the farms will be big, factory-like operations.

One beneficial effect of corporate farm management, companies claim, is that food prices will be held down as cost savings from automation and mass production are passed on to the consumer.

But the trend has its negative aspect too. Independent farmers, many of them tied by generations of tradition to their family farms, see themselves being forced off the land by the thousands. The independent farmer typically has neither the capital nor the technical and business know-how to compete with the vast resources of corporations that go into farming, though a few of the more successful independents are now incorporating themselves.

JUST LIKE RUSSIA?

Feeling against corporate farms runs high in many farming areas. The Springfield (Mo.) Leader and Press in a recent editorial equated corporate farms with the state farms of the Soviet Union.

Some farmers believe corporate farms should be outlawed. In North Dakota, the state legislature earlier this year abolished a law that had prohibited farming by corporations in the state since the 1930's. But the North Dakota branch of the National Farmers Union, aided by a wing of the state Democratic Party, successfully circulated petitions to get the measure before voters in the 1968 general election. Political and legal fights also are shaping up in Kansas and Oklahoma over corporate operations in agriculture. In Washington, some farmer lobbyists are seeking Federal laws that would restrict corporate farm activity while providing cheap loans and higher price supports to bolster independents.