

Farmers' Appeals for U.S. Aid Grow

APPLES, *From A12*

ple crop—and have stayed there since. Average prices of apples nationwide have plummeted from more than \$8 a bushel to less than \$6, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The United States still ran a \$214 million trade surplus in apples in 2000, but that was down \$100 million from 1996.

Last year, the Clinton administration ruled that barrels of imported Chinese concentrate, a syrupy liquid used by companies such as Mott's, were being "dumped" in the United States at a price below the cost of production. In April, the apple industry filed a complaint charging that stiff new U.S. duties were being circumvented by shipments through Canada.

The orchards of Bruce Krenning, an apple grower who is also vice president of the New York Farm Bureau, were struck by hail on Labor Day 1998, resulting in an uninsured loss of \$525,000 in just a few minutes. But it was his apple broker who delivered the bigger blow the following year, informing Krenning that he could find no buyer for Krenning's Greenings and Twenty-Ouncers, two common apple varieties.

Krenning's first thought, he recalled, was "that's why they made whiskey." He finally sold the produce to an apple slicer for less than what he says the fruit cost to grow and harvest.

Then last year, Krenning, a plain-spoken man of 57 whose worry shows i100

in the baggy flesh piling up below his eyes, decided to try a new tack. He broached the idea of seeking direct government aid to a neighbor. After dismissing it out of hand, the neighbor called back the same night and said it might be worth considering.

The state and national farm bureaus supported his initiative, and at a meeting with Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), the senator told him, "Go for it, Bruce—I'll help you all I can."

Apple growers from Michigan, Pennsylvania and Virginia joined the movement, drumming up backing from their congressional delegations, and things "went like wildfire," Krenning said. Krenning and the national Farm Bureau worked closely with the staff of Rep. James Walsh (R-N.Y.), who used his position on the agricultural appropriations subcommittee to include the \$100 million aid provision, along with another \$38 million for potato and apple farmers whose crops had been hurt by fire blight, hail or other weather disasters.

At a Farm Bureau-sponsored meeting in Chicago in December that was also attended by Washington state apple growers, a decision was made to press for \$500 million in 2001.

Yet even some apple growers who have supported the aid express uneasiness about it. "We need a safety net, but we should have alternatives other than direct government payments, such as a crop insurance program that works," grower George Lamont said.

Not all upstate fruit and vegetable farmers are close to bankruptcy. Some with financial reserves are still planting new trees this spring, banking on a turnaround.

But without a better safety net, say spokesmen for growers and farm organizations, the domestic fruit and vegetable industry could one day vanish like the tomato processing plants that used to turn the creeks of this region red during canning season.

"I truly think that what we're deciding here in very rapid fashion," Krenning said, "is, are we going to have food production in the United States of America?"