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WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM THE WHEAT REFERENDUM

*Lloyd H. Davis, Administrator
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We can approach this subject from several points of view. We might talk from the point of view of what "we, the American people," learned from the referendum, from the point of view of what USDA learned, or from other points of view. I will discuss this subject from the point of view of the Extension Service and the particular vantage point from which I observed it. The manner in which we apply the lessons learned from such experiences is important in determining future progress in extension programs.

Near the end of the educational effort preceding the referendum, former Administrator E. T. York wrote the state extension directors commending them for the excellent manner in which the states carried out their responsibilities. The commendations were well deserved. We recognize that much of the credit is due you, the public affairs specialists, who accepted responsibility, took initiative, and worked long and hard to assure a job that was a real credit to the organization. We have had numerous reports of workers in this group who put in many extra hours of work, and who performed admirably in difficult situations.

The wheat referendum, first of all, demonstrated to us and the world that we can act as a national organization, with a high degree of unity of purpose, and do so on short notice when the need is sufficiently great. We demonstrated that we can do this while maintaining at the same time our traditional qualities of a high degree of responsibility for programs by individual states, a high degree of initiative among individual workers, and close relationships with people at the local level in planning and conducting programs.

From our vantage point in viewing the Extension Service, demonstration of this ability seems quite important. Let me remind you that we are a cooperatively administered and financed organization with support from federal, state, and county governments. With the county and state support goes a responsibility for an orientation to state and local goals and with the federal support goes a responsibility for service to national goals. For continued federal support, we repeatedly and continually need to demonstrate an ability to serve a national purpose effectively as a national organization. In the wheat referendum we worked together and

against a difficult deadline for the national goal of developing understanding of a complex issue among wheat producers.

The high degree of responsibility for programs in individual states is likewise important—for in this way we insure orientation to local situations and also encourage maximum individual initiative, a most essential element in carrying out our educational responsibilities.

Second, we demonstrated that we have a national unity in our basic goals and in our philosophy concerning Extension's role. We have talked much about Extension's role as an educational organization. We have repeatedly stressed our responsibility to provide objective, unbiased information, to encourage people to make their own decisions in light of their own situations and their own goals and values. Again and again we have demonstrated this role in various parts of our program. However, some have had doubts about Extension's ability to do this with unity on a national scale, particularly on public issues where the Secretary of Agriculture and the farm organizations have taken positions, in light of our sources of funds and the differing power positions of farm organizations in the various states and counties. But we did demonstrate that we can fulfill this role under such conditions. In doing so, our organization gained in stature.

In every state where wheat is grown Extension conducted special educational work to help people understand the referendum and make their own decisions. In every state Extension demonstrated dedication to the "middle of the road" role. In every state, Extension demonstrated its determination to carry out its responsibilities objectively.

To be sure, we had some minor disagreement concerning the location of the middle of the road—but this is to be expected for nothing is more difficult to identify than pure objectivity. The states approached the job in different ways, and this is a strength associated with our freedom to use individual initiative. Out of such initiative we learn how better to do the job and how to tailor our work to special local needs. The states varied in the intensity and depth of effort due in part to variation in staff resources, past experience, and clientele.

My third observation is that the depth of our educational effort was affected importantly by past experience in public policy education. By depth I refer to the extent to which we led people into economic analysis of the alternatives.

A high degree of depth in such a complex issue obviously

requires specialists and agents with considerable training and experience in teaching economic analysis. But also of importance is a clientele who have been prepared through previous participation for effective use of such teaching. Also, in areas that have a long history of extension work on public economic issues, people have come to expect us in this role—and where past work was more limited, people were less prepared to accept the depth of analysis provided by Extension on such an issue. From these observations and hypotheses I would suggest that in preparation for such issues in the future we strive for continuous strong public policy work.

A fourth observation—that we were able to conduct educational work during the heat of controversy—helps us to maintain our proper posture, and with relatively few wounds. I subscribe to the principle often enunciated by extension workers that the easiest time to conduct educational work on controversial issues is before the lines are drawn, before groups have taken positions. In fact, I think we could in honesty say that educational work is effective only before people have made up their minds and become committed to positions.

Ideally, our educational work should be so conducted that the people who influence a public decision have become fully informed and have carefully analyzed the facts—before the issue becomes “hot,” before the heat of controversy. Such a goal, of course, is never fully attained because we often lack the necessary vision or the necessary resources. Furthermore, such a degree of educational attainment presumes the necessary interest and motivation on the part of the people involved.

I am sure you found last winter and spring before the wheat referendum a higher degree of interest and motivation among more people on policy alternatives than you have seen in a considerable time. Therefore, I think we must accept the inevitability of a responsibility to work occasionally during the heat of controversy. In fact, we might look upon the heightened interest of such a period as an opportunity to reach more people and in greater depth—on issues of current public concern. If we are divorced from important current issues we may soon find ourselves so high in our ivy covered towers that the clouds obscure our view of reality—and so lose our effectiveness in serving the people of the real world.

My fifth observation is that extension workers throughout the land learned again from their own experience the importance of a principle frequently demonstrated in many phases of their educational work. That is that people respect them as they respect the

individual goals and values of each person and the ability and desire of each person to make his own decisions in relation to those goals and values. Much of our strength as an organization lies in this principle. We express it in many ways. We say "we help people help themselves." We say "we don't make decisions for people; we only provide reliable objective information and training in decision making." We say "we are developing people." Basic to these expressions is this respect for the integrity and capability of the individual. By following this principle where local pressures may have tempted them to abandon it, thousands of extension workers have grown in respect and stature in their communities and in personal confidence and satisfaction.

We could, I am sure, discuss other lessons learned—but let me now turn to the future and raise some questions for your consideration. I presume these are questions to which you devote considerable attention in your planning.

A multitude of present and possible future public issues are related to the interests of farm and rural people in a variety of ways. Some are primarily economic issues, others have their primary focus in other fields. For example, of the latter type, to digress a moment, is the growing public question of the extent to which people want to impose restrictions on the use of chemicals to reduce the risk of harmful effects. I fear some extension workers, very competent in technical questions on the use of chemicals but lacking experience in public affairs, tend to join the forces on one side of the battle line rather than to maintain an educational attitude. Perhaps your experience in dealing with economic issues can be used to guide such workers concerned with other public issues.

With our limited staff in Extension, obviously we must choose among the many public issues and alternative means of dealing with them. We could, for example, decide to try to limit our educational work on public issues in a given state to a one-man show. I fear some "public affairs specialists" may have acted as though this was the decision made.

Obviously, many factors must be considered as such program choices are made—size and competency of staff; other program commitments and needs; nature, complexity, and urgency of various public issues; the population that will importantly influence a given public decision. Such a national body as this might well devote some time to consideration of the criteria for systematic selection among program alternatives.

As program decisions are made, we must remember that since

fewer members of our legislative bodies represent predominantly rural areas, the urban interests have a growing influence on agricultural legislation. Let us not forget the power of women and the capability of our women staff members in reaching them.

By all means in looking to the future let us be: (1) doing our best to determine critical issues one to five years from now, (2) weighing these, (3) developing knowledge, and (4) doing the basic work.