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EMERGING POLICY EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

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While concerned about the utilization of agriculture's productive capacity, as policy educators we are interested in the impact that laws and regulations have on individuals and families. The scientist has a role in public policy education, primarily in helping identify potential impacts of proposed methods of dealing with emerging issues that provide special opportunities for public policy education. Well developed program strategies are needed to respond to policy education opportunities.

Emerging Issues

A series of issues were identified as having considerable impact, or the potential for impact, on individuals and families. These relate to:

- personal income taxes
- social security taxes
- property rights and inheritance laws
- consumer protection policies and regulations
- various state referenda — e.g., branch banking in Colorado
- local government programs such as zoning, housing codes, transportation systems, community planning, and taxation plans.

Issues are abundant. The important factor is the necessary expertise to address the issue effectively. Most public policy specialists have expertise in the process for policy education. Such specialists must call on subject matter specialists for any special analyses of the particular issue. Participants believed that in some instances one would have the opportunity to provide the general public with the skills necessary for public participation.

Program Strategies

Three ingredients are necessary to a successful program: (a)

personnel, (b) information and understanding, and (c) a plan for impact.

(a) Personnel — Public policy education requires two types of specialists — one for process and the other, content. Therefore, much policy education work is handled as a team which allows for specialization and increases the effectiveness of the effort.

(b) Information and understanding — The policy educator is urged to consult primary sources on a subject to avoid possible biases that may be inherent in secondary sources of information. Analyses must be careful and comprehensive. It is necessary to identify the various alternatives embodied in an issue and to set out carefully the consequences of each.

Perhaps the most important task is knowing when to stop. Public policy educators must recognize that their roles differ from those of advocates. After the alternatives have been presented and the consequences of each discussed, the educator must allow the public to reach its own conclusions.

(c) Plan for impact — This is the area experiencing the greatest change for the policy educator, influenced in part by the shifting character of the audiences. The manner of reaching various audiences requires new techniques.

Public policy education is expanding beyond its former base at the state specialist level, exclusively within agriculture. This poses some important needs with respect to staff training and preparation. Policy education activities differ from many of the traditional extension endeavors. Special skills are required and extension administration is urged to provide the necessary training for its field personnel as well as those at the state staff level. The work of Verne House and Warren Trock was cited as useful to the planning of a training endeavor.

There was some discussion of the potential that may exist for public policy education in the 4-H program. While such an endeavor may have some hazards, a well-designed effort could be rewarding both for the program planners and for the recipients. The idea may be explored further with the National 4-H Council and/or the National Association of Youth Agents.

Summary

We do have responsibilities as professionals to live within the ethics of science as we undertake to educate the public on policy issues. Issues will change through time as will their relative importance. Once a policy issue has been identified, one should prepare for the role by obtaining the knowledge and understanding of that issue, organizing the personnel and planning the strategy for its consideration.

While one in policy education must remain a scientist, it is wise to be sensitive to the political realities of a situation.

