

THE ROLE OF EXTENSION IN DEALING WITH FARM FAMILIES IN FINANCIAL CRISIS

Ross O. Love

The first noun used in the Smith-Lever Act (Cooperative Extension's enabling Legislation) is "people". The first verb in the act is "aid." In 1944, M. L. Wilson wrote (Kelsey and Heame) "*Extension is a partnership agency in which the officials of government federal, state, and county sit in council with rural people and together analyze local conditions, take stock of their resources, and make and help to carry out programs for the financial, educational, and social benefit of the community and its individual members.*" Liberty Hyde Bailey wrote (Kelsey and Heame) that the objective of Extension work is, "*To teach people who have a desire for information, and to create a desire for information in people who do not yet have the desire.*" To one relatively new to the Extension Service, it does not appear that the ideal objectives of people informing, teaching, and aiding other people have dramatically changed. However, there is reason to question Cooperative Extension Service's ability to anticipate needs, the adequacy of its preparation and structure to respond to those needs, and its willingness or capability to adjust its roles to address such needs. The present farm financial crisis may be an appropriate experimental design for testing Extension Services' abilities to reach the ideal objectives of its mission.

BACKGROUND

This paper spends little time documenting reasons for or the extent of the financial crisis in the United States agricultural sector. Rather, it addresses the role or roles of the Cooperative Extension Service with respect to the present financial crisis. Discussion focuses

on Extension's¹ recognition of the problems, its reaction to date, and the remaining opportunities to meet its goals.

Economic Change Not New

There is little doubt that American agriculture is going through economic and social transition. Transition is not new to agriculture. Winston Churchill painted a picture of American agriculture in the late 1800's in his classic work *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*. He states that, "*Agriculture, like all other branches of American life, had grown immensely since the Civil War. Within 40 years the number of farms and the acreage under cultivation about trebles. Production of wheat, corn, cotton, and other commodities rose in similar proportions. But, life had also become more difficult for the farmer. As production rose, farm prices steadily fell. At the same time farm costs were rising, and large numbers of farmers faced hardship.*" Many of us have read about the experiences of agriculture and rural communities in the 1920-30's. Some vividly remember those days. In the last 100 years, agriculture has experienced change and transition. However, I believe that the transition experienced today is accelerating to the point that the basic structures of many of the institutions serving agriculture are changing very rapidly. Thus, change itself may not be the center of the problem. Rather, the speed at which change is occurring and its effect on the conduct and structure of agricultural systems represent a challenge for the present and future.

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¹ For this paper, Extension will refer to those Cooperative Extension Service units in the various states as well as the Extension Service, USDA. When a specific state or federal entity is discussed, it will be so differentiated.

Recognizing the Need

In retrospect, it seems obvious that we as economists did not anticipate the severity or rate of decline in the agricultural asset base in the 1980s. Several hypotheses to explain this come to mind. First, our model of agriculture (either mental or mathematical) did not allow for enough change in some exogenous variables. Perhaps, in the past, agricultural economists were inclined to look inward to the agricultural sector for the causes and consequences of our problems. In his 1980 American Agricultural Economics Association presidential address, Tweeten forewarned of the need to apply policy analysis that is oriented broader than the agricultural sector. Our models underestimated the adverse effects of monetary and fiscal policies used to bring inflation under control. Also, the models failed to adequately consider United States agriculture within a world-market context. Possibly, we should have had more variables endogenous to our models.

Secondly, our models could not forecast the changes in conduct of the institutions serving agriculture. Our models primarily fell short because of the lack of previous experience or data. Finally, given the speed at which the decline has occurred, it seems unlikely that traditional data bases would have been adequate (even with prior experience) because of a 2-year or longer time lag on much of the state-level information. It appears few, if any, states regularly collected their own data of farmers' financial situations prior to 1983. The great stability and growth experienced in most years from 1945 to 1980 probably had much to do with the lack of timely state or sub-state data bases that research and extension might have applied to the problem. Our experience to-date underscores Neil Harl's call to Land-Grant administrators: *"Statistically reliable information on the economic and financial state of farmers, lenders, and suppliers is crucial for policymakers, those who are implementing policy and those who are endeavoring to cope."*

It seems that we in Extension did not do a very good job of early recognition of the present crisis. Several states did provide limited programs in 1981 and 1982. However, high interest rates started to materialize in 1979 and in many states, significant income declines had accrued by 1980. As early as 1981, land values began to decline. Although

some effort was extended in these early years, it appears that few truly anticipated the onset, extent, or nature of the crisis.

Few extension staffs reallocated resources toward the problem prior to 1983. The effort extended in the early years indicates that, while some may have recognized the beginning, few recognized or anticipated the extent of the crisis. Nor, did we appear to understand the rapidity with which the agricultural sector could decline. As economists, we fully understand the difficulty of anticipation and accurately predicting turning points in economies. Yet, as economists, we should have had the ability to forecast the direction and speed, if not the magnitude, at which the agricultural economy, indebted producers, suppliers, and lenders would undergo change.

Despite the likelihood that extension did not anticipate the commencement or the extent of the problem very well, that may not really be all that important. After all, extension supposedly has an existing structure with expertise which could potentially react quickly to problems as they occur.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SITUATION

In discussing extension's reaction to the financial crisis in agriculture, it seems appropriate to first outline some of the characteristics of the farm situation. The characteristics are rather extensive in number and most relate to a potential or existing function of extension. In order to facilitate discussion, the list was aggregated and reduced to five areas. These are: (1) the stage and extent of the farm problem; (2) decisions and implications either beyond the control and experience of farm families or new to their decision sets; (3) decisions and implications within the control of farm families; (4) the emotional and sociological context of the crisis population; and (5) the changing structure and conduct of the primary agricultural creditors. Each of these five general categories warrants a clarification to facilitate a discussion of Extension's response.

Degree of the Problem Varies

The category referring to the stage and extent of the problem simply is a recognition that all states did not experience the beginning of the crisis at the same time nor have all states experienced the crisis to the same

extent. There may even be states in which the agricultural economies are quite healthy or where the extent of the problem is not yet recognized. However, even these states might feel the destabilizing effects of changes in the structure of institutions supporting agriculture. For example, changes in the Farm Credit System precipitated by financial difficulty in some states will effect the size and use of loan loss reserves, lending procedures, and the costs of funds across the System.

Decisions Outside the Farm Family's Experience

The second and third categories refer to the decisions that farm and ranch families find either impacting on their businesses or necessary to make because of the financial condition of their operations. The second category represents those decisions and actions either out of the family's control or those decisions and actions not generally found in its present decision experience. Those decisions and actions out of the family's control include: monetary and fiscal policy, weather, export demands, and creditor policies. Financial reorganization, liquidation, legal procedures, and non-farm employment represent decisions and actions generally not previously found in farm families' decision sets. These decisions and actions provide a source of frustration and anxiety for most farm families. And many times, the beyond-control decisions and actions dominate the individuals' thoughts and efforts to the detriment of other decisions.

Decisions Within the Farm Family's Experience

The third category (decisions, actions, and implications within the control of the farm family) is designed to refer to those decisions within their control, for which they have decisionmaking experience. This category is probably the broadest and the most obvious. These decisions and actions (and their implications) emanate from the daily operation of the farm business. These decisions and actions also include those important to the interrelated family-business nature of most American farm families. Extension has historically viewed as one of its primary roles

education and assistance related to this set of decisions and actions.

Emotional Stress

The emotional stress and related implications presently experienced by a significant portion of the rural community require a separate category. This stress obviously finds its roots primarily in the added burden of financial difficulties.² At the same time, linkages and communications deteriorate with traditional advisors and support groups such as lenders, farm supply merchants, machinery and equipment dealers, and other farm families. Unfortunately, the sociological context in which these individuals find themselves accentuates the problem. The rural ethic prevalent in most agricultural communities still appears to be "people pulling themselves up, by themselves," and also that business failure is a direct result of personal failure. Thus, at a time when farmers and ranchers must learn to effectively apply sound management skill, their ability to make appropriate decisions is greatly hindered by stress.

Changing Credit Institutions

The final category used to group characteristics of the financial situation pertains to significant change in the conduct and structure of the primary agricultural creditors. Some of the obvious changes in conduct include: movement away from collateral based lending decisions, decreased willingness to accept new customers, greater emphasis on loan servicing, changes in interest rates and loan maturity patterns, an imposition on governmental lenders to save all farms at all cost, and a "running scared" attitude by some of the commercial lenders.

Not only the conduct of the institutions changed, however. Generally, big changes in a business environment perpetrate changes in the structure of business institutions. This has been true of the agricultural lending institutions. Rapidly rising interest rates initially commenced a considerable change in the structure of commercial banks. This change was brought about by sweeping deregulation at the Federal level and within many states. Subsequently, the problems of agriculture severely threatened the one asset

² Emotional stress comes from a variety of sources. Often emotional stress can be healthy both mentally and physically. This paper focuses on the destructive emotional stress brought about by financial difficulties.

portfolio of the Farm Credit System. Liquidation, reorganization, consolidation, changing regulatory authority, and the creation of new institutions such as the Farm Credit Capital Corporation resulted. Finally, it might be argued the loan servicing, deferral programs, and increased emphasis on guaranteed loans represent only a change in conduct and not structure of Farmers Home Administration. However, continuing to service present borrowers who possess lower longer run viability at the expense of potential new borrowers who have become eligible as the economic climate worsened is an important structural change.

Extension's Response

In reviewing extension's efforts in response to the financial crisis across the South and into the Midwest, it is evident that extension perceived itself as having a function in addressing and assisting with each of the categories representing characteristics of the situation. The following discussion reviews extensions's direct and indirect engagement of the problems created by the crisis.

Response Varied

State extension units varied in their ability to recognize and define the problem, outline possible actions, and implement programs to address the financial crisis. In those states where the crisis began early and/or the problem is the greatest, we would hope that the response would be faster and larger. While in general that may have occurred, there definitely does not appear to be a one-to-one correspondence. At first thought, and from early discussions with colleagues, it might appear that the South generally may have responded slower and to a lesser extent than the level of its agricultural financial problems may indicate. Whether the South's problems are greater or less than the Plains, Northeast, Mountain states or the Corn Belt appears to be questionable depending on the indicators one chooses.

Even though many individuals made positive contributions, the South's state Cooperative Extension Services on the whole may not have committed resources as timely or to the extent as some other parts of the country. However, first impressions are often incorrect. Possibly, the better test would be how well the various states responded relative to the amount of resources they originally had committed to financial management

and planning subject matter. Most Southern States generally had fewer resources (and people) already in the area of finance than some Midwest and Corn Belt states. Therefore, in relation to the resources available, the response in much of the South may be quite good. Also, in parts of the South, the Land-Grant institutions operate in a structure that separates the extension and research components. Given the contributions to information and programming that research faculty made in several states, one might hypothesize that response to major problems may be faster with an integrated research-extension structure.

The varied rate and extent of Extension's response has a very positive aspect. It has resulted in a wealth of information and experience accruing to those individuals and states that had the responsibility to make major efforts imposed upon them or assumed by them. Extension as a group of educators ought to be able to make effective use of such information and program experience. If we believe that the present level of transition in agriculture will last several years, it is imperative that we gather the best information from all the programs to make the most efficient use of extension's resources.

Again, accurate, timely data at the state or sub-state level are critical to designing and implementing successful program responses. Major efforts have been undertaken in some states to establish such data bases. All states recognizing a financial crisis can benefit from such experiences and initiate their own data collection procedures. The information collected results in improved governmental policy decisions, better coordination of extension efforts (from county through state); a more accurate awareness of the problem by agricultural and non-agricultural communities, and more accurate targeting of program efforts.

Response to Decisions Outside the Family's Experience

In general, those states with significant program efforts directed toward the financial crisis have found it necessary to address the issues, decisions, and implications of category number two. Many states have contributed significantly to the farm community's understanding of items beyond the decision-maker's control, including monetary and fiscal policy, governmental policy, and export

demand. Few state Extension Services have contributed sufficiently to an understanding by the farm public of creditor policies and conduct. Whether this issue is too difficult to address, because of the rapid changes, or is receiving its proper priority is uncertain. Given the questions, misconceptions, and inefficient and stressed borrower-lender relationships we often see in Oklahoma, it seems doubtful that Extension has given proper priority to the issue.

Extension was at best only partially prepared to help with those decisions either partially out of the farm families' control or new to their decision experience. Many state and area specialists could assist with financial reorganization under increasing asset values. However, while our decision and economic theories provided a basis, at first, few extension staff members had experience or information to assist with reorganization under rapidly falling asset values. Extension was ill-equipped to help with decisions regarding either forced or voluntary readjustment of income sources. Such readjustments often involve partial or complete liquidation of farming enterprises and the addition of non-farm employment. Related complications often include financial legalities and important tax implications. In Oklahoma, for example, Extension found itself well equipped to address the economic and tax implications of the liquidation decision, but less prepared to assist with the alternative employment and legal implications.

States actively and extensively responding to the financial crisis have found themselves in changing and probably not well anticipated roles. This results from the decisions made necessary by characteristics in category two. Extension has been required to take the role of a broker of information or intermediary between the farm family and other sources of assistance. Considerable effort has been expended in training extension personnel to recognize problems for which extension is not well equipped to address and to refer individuals with such problems to other appropriate agencies. While this role is not totally new, adequate information on networking has become a necessary major emphasis within a complete programming effort directed at agriculture's financial problems.

Additionally, many state extension services directly provided information and assistance in areas not traditional to extension. For example, one state was provided the resources

and authority to provide legal assistance. Other states have provided assistance, or are investigating the idea of providing expertise, to court approved mediation teams. While agricultural law is not new to Extension, some of the roles assumed are definitely changes from Extension's role in the past. Other examples include assisting with non-farm employment, family counseling, and borrower/creditor workout procedures.

Response to Decisions Within the Family's Experiences

Originally, Extension was probably best prepared to contribute to the decisions and questions generally perceived as part of the day-to-day management of a farm business. Even in this area, the various state Extension Services seldom had the framework or a sufficient number of specially trained individuals to adequately and efficiently provide the type of multidisciplinary education and assistance necessary to adequately address the problems. Not only did the severity and speed of the changes leave Extension short in areas traditionally of lower emphasis, i.e., law and non-farm employment, but also in production, marketing, and financial decisionmaking.

Despite the magnitude of the problem, many state Extension Services have done themselves proud in fulfilling the mission of "people informing, educating, and aiding other people." In general, Agricultural Economics departments have taken the lead. They initially viewed their roles as within the traditional operating and organizational aspects of the farm business. Yet, the problems of profitability, reorganization, and life style change necessitated broader effort. Most of the programming efforts can be differentiated into seven general thrusts. Individual states have emphasized and combined some or all of the thrusts in addressing issues relating to category number three (and other categories as well). These thrust areas are: (1) group education for the primary target audience, (2) training personnel (both Extension and non-Extension), (3) limited individual assistance, (4) comprehensive individual assistance, (5) referral, (6) awareness, and (7) Extension organization (or reorganization).

It appears that there is no one "best" programming thrust. Combinations might differ from one state to the next, or even within a state. In my opinion, all seven programming

thrusts are necessary to successfully aid the people in need. However, I believe that comprehensive individual assistance, referral, and Extension reorganization are the key program thrusts. Buel Lanpher has stated that in his view, "two general priority directions are needed ...given the current and longer term environment in agriculture ... intense and in-depth individual management assistance" and "provide a larger number of farmers with intensive, in-depth management assistance."

I generally agree with his statement, yet realize the great burden of trying to accomplish these priorities. Many states appear successful in linking the management assistance to initial group education and follow-up group education. Reorganization of Extension's operating structure in some states (whether temporary or permanent) has contributed positively through selective, in-depth training of county agents for special assignments, development of easily applicable financial planning microcomputer software, multi-county specialized teams, and the addition of temporary personnel. Finally, to truly maximize the number reached with in-depth management and planning assistance, Extension must be prepared to identify comparative advantage within the context of the problem and to refer clientele to other individuals or organizations for those needs beyond Extension's role. Thus, a well organized, fast reacting referral organization or network is a necessity.

Response to Farm Community Emotional Stress

Emotional stress is probably the most common characteristic, next to being in debt, among farm and ranch families in financial stress. Emotional stress often must be overcome or reduced before any meaningful progress can be made in a family's financial situation. We, in agricultural Extension (except for a few) were ill-prepared to provide meaningful aid to this part of the problem. Our colleagues in home economics Extension appear to be better prepared for emotional stress management. However, it is evident in most states that the training level of home economics state and county staffs is still inadequate in this area. At first thought, it might seem that stress management skills are better left to others. Unfortunately, the complex interrelated nature of farm family problems makes it impossible for Extension personnel

working on financial management and planning education and assistance to divorce themselves from addressing the families' emotional stress. Nor should Extension try to divorce itself. To the extent that we are in the "people helping" business, learning and teaching effective communication skills and sensitivity are beneficial. Therefore, since the role seems destined for those of us trying to aid farm families at this time, it is imperative that we make every effort to prepare ourselves for this role. Once again, adequate training and a well organized referral network are the keys to executing this role.

Some states have had good success by encouraging specialization among agricultural agents, home economists, and temporary personnel in team efforts. While all may have some emotional stress training, usually one member of the team has had either more training or experience. Some states have also extended their resources and efforts by facilitating and supporting farm families in self-help mutual support groups. While these groups do not diminish the need for stress training for those working with farm families, they do multiply the continuing aid effort and provide one link in the referral network.

Response to Changing Lending Institutions

The final important characteristic of the financial crisis within the scope of extension activity is the rapidly changing conduct and structure of the agricultural lending institutions. There seems little doubt the fluctuations in interest rates in the late 1970s and early 1980s coupled with the changing structure of agriculture would have perpetuated many changes in the financial institutions. The Farm Credit System's *Project 1995* attempted to forecast how agriculture would change over the next 10 years. Yet, the rapidly changing institutional structure has already dated that 1984 study.

Extension's role concerning the changing structure of agricultural lending institutions seems at least twofold. First, we must be as prepared and up-to-date on the changes as possible. While the changes in conduct have immediate implications, the structural changes may provide longer term implications. We need to encourage our research colleagues to address these issues and to do so very quickly. We need to incorporate the changes and their implications into program

efforts. Whether through group teaching thrust, general awareness, and/or individual assistance, the relevant changes must be incorporated in a timely manner. This is not a particularly new role for Extension. However, the rate of change and both the short- and the longer-term implications make the role considerably more significant.

A second role for Extension, in the changing structure of lending institutions, is to provide input to the institutions and public policymakers as these groups affect changes. In addressing land-grant universities' challenge in the financial crisis, Harl stated, "The complexity of modern-day problems, and the highly integrated nature of the typical problem set, suggest that the task of developing policy intervention alternatives is a proper area for scholarly activities." I would carry Harl's idea of policy intervention to the possibility of extending quality scholarly input concerning change directly to the institutions' decisionmakers.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT OUR SELECTED ROLES

It would appear that all the roles either imposed upon or assumed by Extension in the financial crisis fit within the broad nature of the Extension mission. Despite appearances, questions arise almost daily in the various states pertaining to the programs assisting farm and ranch families in financial crisis. Four questions that often arise are: (1) Are these programs too concerned with helping those who will no longer be in agriculture in a few years?, (2) Is providing individual assistance on a large scale a proper role for Extension?, (3) Is Extension able to make significant resource adjustments to meet major problems?, and (4) Is Extension able to make a difference?

Who is Helped?

There are several answers to those who question whether the clientele group assisted by these programs is appropriate. First, Extension's mission would appear to be fulfilled very well when aid is provided to those who need aid the most. Experienced management or marketing specialists would probably agree the Extension is experiencing one of the most teachable moments for management and planning education. Financial difficulty is the most obvious reason a farm family becomes ready to learn. However, Extension must make

every effort to extend the teachable moment to those not yet required to take major steps because of their financial situation. There seems little doubt that Extension could provide important educational assistance to those farm and ranch families in the earlier stages of potential financial stress.

Actually, in large part, we are assisting these people. Data reported by the Extension Service, USDA (1985 a and b) from selected states indicate that only about 8 percent of those assisted through financial crisis programs could be identified as leaving farming in the near future. Our own experience in Oklahoma shows that about 5 percent of the farm families we work with will probably leave farming in the next 2 years. Our data also show that about 30 percent will partially liquidate capital assets, but remain in farming. Thus, it does not appear that these programs reach only those who are "too far gone." Yet, increased efforts to reach more of the less severely stressed is definitely warranted.

Individual Assistance?

Some wonder whether Extension should be providing individual assistance in a financial counseling framework. Such programs have often been extended to clientele in the past. In fact, Extension has many of these programs in existence today. Family energy programs, small farm programs, and local government programs are just a few that provide in depth, one-on-one type assistance. Based on discussions with specialists from other states, it appears that none have really developed a more effective means of assisting with management and planning under financial stress. I do encourage each Extension specialist to find a better means, because the individual approach is very resource intensive. I also recommend that individual assistance be provided in conjunction with group education. This group education should be commenced at approximately the same time the assistance is provided and group education follow-up should be planned to provide continuing educational support.

Extension Resource Adjustments?

Extension's ability and willingness to make internal resource adjustments in light of major agricultural problems may be our most serious challenge. Ron Knutson (1985b) and others have discussed Extension's structure

and change. It would appear to me that while segments and individuals of our system may have been quick to respond to the present financial situation, in general we have not rearranged our staff and program resources in proportion to our ability. There are, of course, arguments against transferring considerable resources to the problem. These arguments include, "we have to keep other programs going", "isn't this just a short-run problem", and "that's just a financial problem." Of course, these decisions must be made on a state-by-state and program-by-program basis. All extension units around the country do not face the problem to the same extent and all are not endowed with equal resources. However, for those state in financial crisis and those approaching that point, to not grasp the present opportunities to fulfill the extension mission through significant reorganization of resources is a serious error.

Important opportunities exist to train county staffs (not to mention state and area staffs) in business management and planning, economic thought, stress management, and resource allocation. This training could produce considerable fruit if we adhere to the observation made by Tweeten (1985) that, *"one of the major structural changes has been the rise in importance of organizational relative to operational management. Operational management requires not only personal touch in husbandry but also technical skills in animal and plant science. Organizational management on the other hand requires farm and financial management skill. If organizational management is the major problem operators face in competing with large industrial type farms, then Extension must play a key role in raising organizational management capabilities if family farms are to compete with large farms for survival."*

We must be prepared to train our county and area personnel. In addition, we must be prepared to provide an example and guidance in our commitment to a major effort to minimize adverse effects both today and in the future on our agricultural community. We must transmit the importance of Extension and be able to examine and revise priorities and programming to respond to major needs. This task should be approached with a realistic attitude. For example, we must understand that all personnel can not and should not provide comprehensive computer analyses for individual management decisions

and planning purposes. Instead, extension programs should target those with a competitive advantage based on such criteria as background, desire and location and provide adequate training. Thus, opportunity is present for "Extension to experiment with alternative forms of organization" as suggested by Knutson (1985a). Knutson went on to suggest that "Technologically up-to-date county agents may need to become multi-county specialists in particular areas of expertise. The leadership and social function of county agents may need to be separated from the technology transfer function."

Finally, if Extension is to respond as outlined in its "Regaining Farm Profitability in America" (Greenwood and Woests), it must continue to seize the opportunity to change Extension's structure. Establish a structure that can change in an organized manner toward the goals outline in "Regaining Farm Profitability in America". These goals are: an improved interdisciplinary systems approach, increased emphasis on farm (family) financial management, increased understanding of farm, family and personal stress associated with financial stress. A structure that can revise priorities and programming toward these goals allows for the potential to respond to additional problems as they might occur in the future.

Success in Retrospect?

Extension is making a difference for farm families in financial crisis. I believe that in a few years when we look back at this period, Extension's role in this financial crisis will be recognized as one of its best success stories. Many very positive items have occurred because of Extension's efforts around the country. Often, university and extension administrators have been shocked by the extent of the problem and the powerful efforts have often lead to positive support from the administrators in terms of resources and flexibility. Extension also benefits from the improved training for present staff and addition of new staff. Tools and methods for financial planning and family decisionmaking have been improved or created much more quickly than under more ordinary conditions.

Almost daily, success stories are recognizable due to the help Extension has provided farm families. Although positive feedback is consistently received for the clientele assisted (farm and ranch families, lenders, me-

dia, etc.) many working in these financial crisis programs may not recognize their contribution. My colleagues say that the reason for this is that while very good work is being done, we can and need to do more. Finally, through these programs, Extension has been able to reach many people not previously familiar with our service. This result could prove very important in the years to come.

IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITIES

As most successful entrepreneurs realize, economic adversity often provides positive opportunity. It seems appropriate for Extension and particularly extension economists to practice a little entrepreneurship within the adversity created by the current financial crisis in agriculture. Many opportunities now exist for Extension to better meet its mission both today and in the years to come. Extension economists will plan an important role in taking advantage of these opportunities. Some of these opportunities have already been discussed in this paper. The following discussion reviews those opportunities already mentioned and suggests others.

Opportunities exist to re-evaluate clientele and present programs. Recommending Extension personnel and units to change priorities and methods seems obvious in light of the recommendations we give farm families experiencing financial stress. Should we expect less of ourselves than we do of our clients? Extension has an opportunity to change the "never stop doing any program once it has been started" nature for which it is notorious.

The financial crisis presents opportunities to acquire experience and training faster and in more depth than would otherwise be possible. The general level of understanding for all county agricultural agents and home economists can be significantly raised in the areas of business management and planning, decisionmaking, and stress management. Also, a specific subset of Extension staff can be targeted for intense in-depth training on these subjects. Those state, area, and county staffs will gain valuable experience through one-to-one assistance opportunities. For example, in Oklahoma several new agricultural economics area specialists are experiencing daily the decisions and constraints integral to farm business organizational and operational management. Because of the financial crisis, these new specialists basically know only a mul-

tidisciplinary systems approach to problem solving because that has been their experience from the start.

Opportunities also have surfaced for creating and maintaining much improved working relationships with non-Extension groups. Many of these groups have actually sought ideas as to how they might make a positive contribution. In many states, cooperation with agricultural lenders, lawyers and legal aides, other educational units, governmental agencies, and farm organizations has been strengthened noticeably during the last 18 months. Networks and information channels are being built. These will pay big dividends for agriculture and Extension in the future. New methods must be sought and encouraged to take advantage of the cooperation. Again, only if Extension is flexible in thought and program will it be able to successfully break new ground in areas like legal mediation, emotional health training, community resource groups, lifestyle transition, and complete decisionmaking education.

Opportunities also exist to improve Extension's image. Most of the problems created by the financial crisis either are or could be very highly visible. Extension staff, program directors, and administrators should project the positive aspects of these programs at every opportunity. In a time when county agents are constantly fighting failing budget support, positive visibility for Extension is essential. Careful planning should be exercised to improve the return. For example, individual case information is one of the best communication vehicles in working with policymakers and the media. Adequately informing cooperating non-Extension groups and helping them understand where they should target their positive comments about Extension's actions also is well worth our time. Keeping media well-informed and up-to-date enhances the desired visibility.

Many additional opportunities exist for Extension. I will simply review briefly one other area already discussed in the paper. Again, Extension is faced with the opportunity to provide assistance and direction as the institutions of agriculture adjust to the rapid transition. Extension specialists and researchers together must make scholarly contributions to the change process. Extension and its other counterparts in the Land-Grant System have, in the past, been able to contribute

positively to changes in agriculture. But, today, Extension and especially agricultural economists, are in a position to analyze and play an active role in the most rapid change agriculture has experienced in 40 years. Are we equal to the challenge?

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