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IDAHO'S APPROACH TO PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION

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Idaho is very much a rural state with only six cities of over 20,000. With 713,000 people, it ranks forty-second in the nation in population, but thirteenth in area. Agriculture is the leading industry. Agricultural and rural policies are very important to Idaho, but geography makes it difficult to carry university programs out into the state. Most of the population is in the southern part of the state, a distance of 300 to 600 miles from Moscow, the site of our university. Our most distant counties are about as far from Moscow as Washington, D.C. is from Atlanta, or nearly as far as from Washington to Chicago. Our travel funds have been limited by current budget pressures, and our staff is small. We have two men in community resource development work and two man equivalents in agricultural economics. Three of us have both extension and research responsibilities.

Our public policy education work has consisted mainly of: (1) participation in regional workshops, (2) work with interim legislative committees, (3) distribution of public policy materials to county agents, (4) mass mailings of articles through publication in "Economic Facts for Idaho Agriculture," and (5) radio tapes. We have also had discussions with selected groups in a few counties, and we are planning some in-service training for our county agents.

REGIONAL WORKSHOPS

One of the strange results of past legislation was the creation of two land-grant universities, Washington State University and the University of Idaho, only eight miles apart. Naturally, we confront many similar problems, which incidentally we share with other adjoining states. Therefore, joint programs are both possible and desirable.

For the past two years we have conducted jointly with Washington State University educational programs for directors of cooperatives and elevator managers in our two states. The program involves personnel from both institutions and is offered at various locations within the two states. This year Oregon State University is joining us on both of these programs, and Montana State University is joining us on the program for cooperative direc-

tors. The joint program approach has enabled us to spread scarce resources over a broader area, and we think it has led to more effective programs. None of us has had to tool up for *all* topics covered.

Although these have not been public policy programs, they do suggest a direction that such programs could take. The agribusinesses with which we have dealt in these programs have common problems that are not confined within state lines. Hence, multistate approaches are appropriate. The same reasoning can be applied to most public policy issues.

LEGISLATIVE CONTACT

Last year I served as a consultant to an Interim Legislative Committee on Potato Problems. The committee was faced with two opposing factions, neither of which was willing to change its stand. One group argued that the way to improve farmers' income was through supply controls and a state marketing order. The other group took the position that farm income could best be improved through an increase in funds devoted to research, and advertising and promotion financed by a self-imposed tax.

The committee first needed information on the current situation. Fortunately, considerable data had been assembled for a Northwest potato marketing study. The committee used the text and tables as reference material. We discussed the current situation with the committee and met with it a few times thereafter.

The state marketing order, one alternative, promised little benefit for Idaho growers, as other producing areas likely would expand production to take up any slack imposed by the order. With little, if any, price improvement over the longer run, Idaho's income from potatoes would decline by the amount of reduced production. The committee was so advised. Ultimately, legislation was passed for an increased tax at the grower, processor, and shipper levels. It was contingent on a grower referendum which failed by a few votes. Hence the problem remains and seems certain to reappear when potato prices weaken.

Legislators are an excellent target audience for public policy education, especially where resources are as limited as ours. However, for many legislators, influenced by emotional appeals, some basic principles must be laid down at the outset.

AGENT TRAINING

Our contact with the legislators points to another approach that can be very effective in Idaho. Our county agents are well

acquainted with legislators from their counties, most of whom have had only limited exposure to public policy or other economic areas. Therefore, we are planning intensive in-service training in economics for our agents to help them work more effectively with legislators and others in their counties. The plans call for one-half to one day sessions on specific topics, but hopefully these will be broadened to one-week sessions. Regional workshops may offer possibilities here.

We believe that agent training will stimulate county programs on other policy issues. In the past, we have provided our agents with materials on issues such as who will control agriculture and state water planning. While brief resumes have gone with this material, there is little evidence that its distribution has resulted in county programs.

MASS MAILINGS

“Economic Facts for Idaho Agriculture,” a quarterly publication produced by our extension economists, is mailed to about 4,500 people. The spring and fall issues of this four-page circular are devoted to outlook, but the winter and summer issues are devoted to current policy and other concerns. Examples include “Agricultural Policy—Some of the Issues,” “Corporate and Other Large Farms—Is This Where We’re Headed,” “Information Uses for Agricultural Business Decisions,” and “Impact of New Idaho Land Development on Prices.”

It is difficult to measure the impact of this type of distribution. However, the feedback has been mostly favorable, and requests for additional copies are common.

RADIO TAPES

Each week our agricultural editor releases to radio stations throughout the state five three-minute interview tapes from the college. We use these tapes to call attention to materials covered in “Economic Facts” and to clarify points made in our publications. But because brevity is the key, in-depth treatment of any subject is impossible.

To sum up, as we in rural Idaho re-examine our approach to public policy education, it appears that regional workshops, contacts with legislators, and in-service training may offer the greatest potential for program improvement.