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AAEA'S NEED FOR EXTENSION ECONOMISTS\*

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Following an extension worker's prerogative, I have changed my assigned topic to suit my point of view. The other reactors have spoken persuasively to "extension economists' need for AAEA" and the services that AAEA can provide to them. I, however, would like to turn this around and suggest ways in which extension economists can contribute to AAEA and the profession in general. I will also outline some specific challenges (as I see them) that relate to agricultural economics as a profession.

Regardless of the source of our employment and funding, we can divide our functions as agricultural economists into the three categories of resident instruction, research, and extension. All of us are involved in one or more of these functions with some specializing almost exclusively in one, and others being diversified in performing all three. Within this context "extension economists" might be employed by the Cooperative Extension Service, some other public agency, or private industry, but all function in a similar way.

Some of the features that distinguish the role of the extension economist are as follows:

1. He identifies and assigns priorities to the day-to-day, pressing problems of his clientele through interaction with them and other professionals.
2. He responds by developing and disseminating economic information and education materials, and by conducting applied research and interpreting research findings.

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3. He conducts training sessions and leads meetings at which economic issues are presented, discussed, analyzed, and maybe resolved.
4. He communicates and interacts with professionals in other disciplines to explain economic concepts and serves on interdisciplinary teams.
5. The extension economist works with researchers in agricultural economics to identify problems and to provide input into the research process.
6. He attempts to keep abreast of recent research and teaching developments within his profession, as well as keeping informed of current events affecting the clientele with whom he works.

To summarize the above functions, extension economists serve at the interface between the profession and the public. Of the members of the profession, the extension economists are the most visible to the general public. To that extent they tend to shape the image of the profession in the minds of the public. At the same time, they provide the feedback mechanism from the public to the profession identifying problems and institutional frameworks to affect the relevancy of research.

By now you've anticipated the essence of my argument, i.e., not only do extension economists need AAEA, but the AAEA, representing the profession in general, needs extension economists. This is not to argue that extension economists have performed as effectively as they might, or that the profession has ignored them. What I am saying is that we need to pursue the integration of extension economists into the profession from the point of view that it will be mutually beneficial. Extension economists have more to contribute to the AAEA than their membership dues.

Now, more specifically, how and where can extension economists contribute to the profession?

1. I feel that agricultural economists need to give more attention to the public image of their profession. Extension economists can play an important role here by helping to build a more effective communication link between the profession and the public. I don't believe that the image of our profession is that bad, but it could be improved. There needs to be a better public understanding of what the agricultural economist does, the types of problems with which he deals, and how he contributes to the general welfare.
2. It's time that the profession gave more attention to helping the public better understand economic policy issues. The economic literacy of the public, particularly as it relates to agricultural and resource issues, is still at a low level. Myths, or at best oversimplifications, are being perpetuated regarding such issues as food prices, food quality, organic farming, environmental quality, and the ideal of the family farm. A concerted attempt to raise the economic literacy of the public could well be led by extension economists.
3. Extension economists can help the profession in identifying relevant problems on which to work (Nielson). At almost regular intervals a call goes out from the leaders of our profession to redirect our research efforts. Better mechanisms need be found to capitalize on the contribution extension economists can make by identifying high priority problems for research economists.
4. Extension economists can also assist in suggesting research methodology, providing data, and evaluating the usefulness of the results.
5. The profession needs to improve its working relationships with other disciplines and exploit opportunities for team research and extension

(Kolmer). Through their contacts with other disciplines extension economists can serve in a liaison role to better organize cooperative efforts.

6. Too many individuals in our profession have a low level of communication skills. We've all seen several examples at these meetings to support this. Extension economists can help their fellow economists to improve their communication skills.

What can be done to draw extension economists into a closer working relationship with the AAEA? This is a responsibility that needs to be shared jointly. Extension economists, if they are to fulfill one of their major roles of keeping abreast of new professional advancements, need to take advantage more fully of the opportunities offered through the Journal and the meetings. On the other hand, I feel that the AAEA has an obligation to more fully recognize the contribution extension economists can make. In the year ahead, our AAEA Extension Affairs Committee faces the important challenge of drawing on the implications from this survey (Christensen and Dorow) to develop specific programs involving extension economists to provide for their maximum contribution to the profession.

#### References

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