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INNOVATIVE EXTENSION PROJECTS FOR PART-TIME FARMERS:

There Is No Funding

by Christina H. Gladwin

If we can help the big guys survive, grow rich and at some future date try to gobble up the farming operations of these 'family producing units'—why can't we help...the part-time farm...organize and operate a successful farming enterprise? (Cochrane in CHOICES, Second Quarter 1987)

Recent calls to restructure Cooperative Extension programs have come from many quarters. Some of the calls have been in response to the threat that federal funding for extension will be eliminated, others at reform have reflected recent structural changes in U.S. agriculture. The changes have been so pervasive that the farm population is now too heterogeneous to be served by a "cafeteria-style" extension program designed to help all part-time, full-time, advanced, and beginning farmers.

The expressed concerns about Cooperative Extension programs and my own interest in the survival power of part-time farms (that now comprise 86 percent of U.S. farms) led me to search for extension programs that focused on part-time farmers and were considered innovative and beneficial to them. As Cochrane pointed out in the Second Quarter 1987 issue of CHOICES, part-time farmers have not received major attention by cooperative extension programs, even though the overwhelming majority of today's farmers are part-timers.

What I Found

From the list of projects that I found, three focused on part-time as well as full-time farmers and another three projects, focused primarily on part-time farmers.

Opportunity Farm Program in Minnesota

Originally funded in 1977 but recently terminated, John Eix's Opportunity Farm Program in Hubbard and Wadena Counties, Minnesota, was a program that used experienced local farmers as program aides to work one-on-one with family farmers who perceived problems in their farming activities. The problems ranged from crop and dairy production, to machinery repair, and on to financial planning. By 1985, Eix's program had contacted 750 farm families and was active with 150 families. To help with financial planning, Eix and aides met with no more than five farm couples in a couple's living room, and, during three Sunday-night meetings asked, "Where are you?" "Where do you want to be?" "How can you get there?" Finpack, a software package developed by Hawkins

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and others at Minnesota's Center for Farm Financial Management, then helped farmers find the answers. Typically, Finpack and its operators would calculate beginning and ending net worth of the farm business, as well as cash flows for one to three years into the future. Farm plans were then altered to see if improvements could be made.

Missouri's 1440 Program

Missouri's 1440 program, designed to help farmers cope with the farm crisis, is an ideal program for "new" part-time farms. It was motivated by Judy and Bill Heffernans' now-famous study of 40 north Missouri families who, for financial reasons, had to quit farming. As reported in the June 1986 *Rural Development Perspectives*, the Heffernans, rural sociologists and farmers themselves, found that 97 percent of the men and women whose farms were in a financial crisis became depressed and withdrew from family and friends; 81 percent experienced big mood swings and were unable to make decisions; 49 percent became more physically aggressive. Their children often became violent, depressed, and unable to perform well in school.

The Missouri Extension Service responded to the Heffernans' research by organizing a Career Options program, a Rural Community Service Coordinator project, a Rural Youth and Stress Project, and an Alternative Crops Program. Funding (\$480,000) came from funds earmarked for mental health outreach programming under Section 1440 of the 1985 Food Security Act. Extension personnel along with local religious and community leaders, are working with five community health centers in northern and central Missouri. They establish support groups to help clients develop self-guided educational networks for dealing with the farm crisis. For teenagers, they conduct programs about teen stress and depression, train 4-H teen camp counselors, and have prepared a video, "The Rural Crisis Comes to School." The Career Options program helps farmers who are considering new careers via a toll-free hotline and workshops that help farmers develop job hunt strategies, write resumes, complete job applications, and conduct job interviews.

Job Placement in Michigan

A somewhat similar program is available in Michigan. The Michigan Job Placement Program for Displaced Farm Families and Their Employees works with farmers' clubs that have formed to help farmers face the nonfarm labor market for the first time. The program, co-directed by agricultural economists Colletta Moser and Jerry Halm, offers on-the-job training and short-term refresher courses in occupations that require short-term training, e.g., typing and welding. It also provides personal training in financial, time, and stress management. Because Michigan offers more off-farm employment opportunities than most other states, Moser feels that the program can help many of the 6000 farmers who may be displaced from farming. It is statewide and operated through the Extension Service with a staff of 12 special agents. Moser, a labor economist by training, says it is successful because "There is no stigma attached to going into a Cooperative Extension office, particularly in rural areas. That's important." The 1000 people who have enrolled in the program agree.

Small Farm Rehabilitation in Alabama

In contrast to programs that help farmers get nonfarm work and adjust to being part-timers or nonfarmers, the main goal of the Tuskegee Small Farm Rehabilitation Project (SFRP) was to help reorganize the farms of 26 black part-time farmers in nine Alabama counties. The twenty-six were already in financial trouble with Farmers Home Administration (FmHA). The cooperative effort of Tuskegee University and FmHA, SFRP received \$376,000 funding for 2 years, 1985-87. Program farmers were introduced to better bookkeeping methods for crops and livestock, and all received a farm plan to reduce costs, diversify cropping patterns, and emphasize subsistence production. Farmers were also given information on estate planning in an effort to prevent further loss of farmland owned or farmed by blacks.

From the start, problems arose because the funding agency did not have the same goals as the farmers and the Tuskegee team. FmHA county supervisors, anxious to recoup the agency's losses as quickly as possible, were encouraging capital- and labor-intensive farming strategies that had potentially high profits. At the same time, the participating farmers, who were reluctant to take unnecessary risks, asked the Tuskegee team for farm plans that would allow them to cut back farm production and switch to lower-labor, lower-risk, and lower-income crops, to enable them to increase their off-farm work. Faced with uncertainties in both farm prices and the off-farm labor market, they also wanted to reschedule their debts over a longer period of time—something that FmHA was loath to do.

Farming Systems Research/Extension in Florida

A farming systems research/extension (FSR/E) program is an ideal program for part-time farms because it starts with farmers' constraints as given and develops, through on-farm trials and close interaction with farmers, recommendations to improve the farm family's level of living.

The north Florida FSR/E project in Suwannee and Columbia counties was an excellent example of this approach. It was started in 1981 and received about \$60,000 per year of funding. In 1985/86 it reported five major activities. It developed two volumes of the "Suwannee Valley Retail Farm Directory" for a five county area. It ran an 8-session record-keeping school that attracted 54 people, mostly farm couples. It assisted over 30 growers to plant small (2-4 acre) nursery plots of perennial peanuts. It started a Perennial Peanut Association of 30 producers. It studied the needs and potentials of vegetable producers; partly based on the success of these activities, the state legislature appropriated \$500,000 for the first phase of a \$4,100,000 State Farmers Market.

Women in Agriculture in Florida

Another ideal program for part-time farms is a Women in Agriculture (WIA) program, which recognizes and supports women who farm. The effort designs educational programs especially for women, but always with "partners invited." I worked with home economists Katey Walker and Evelyn Rooks-Weir to start the Florida program in 1982. The overall program is based on the realization that farm prices are now so low that someone in the family has to have a full-time off-farm job to subsidize the farm and feed the family. Because women make 60 cents for every dollar men make off the farm, many farm men now take the off-farm job and let farm women pick up much of the farm work. The modern farm woman increasingly "pitches in and helps" with the physical running of the farm as well as the financial management. This means that

the family farm is not dying, but changing into a farm with an active woman farmer and a part-time male farmer. It is time extension faced that fact!

Something Missing

My personal observation was that these six programs had much to offer part-time farmers. Each was oriented to issues perceived as important by farm families. Each was innovative in that there were no previous programs with similar goals and methods. Each had dedicated, enthusiastic, hardworking extension personnel in charge of the program.

They also had one other common feature—funding was very limited and the availability of future funding was extremely tenuous. Florida's Women in Agriculture Program, for example, received state funding only for printing brochures. Money to support the program speakers in regional seminars was solicited in some counties from agribusinesses; in others, county agents and district directors objected to "begging for money."

In some cases, the programs have already ceased because of lack of funds. After eight successful years, Minnesota's Opportunity Farm Program is no longer funded, because according to Eix, no one funds an "oldie but goodie." Tuskegee's Small Farm Rehabilitation Project funding was over before the Tuskegee team learned if it had been successful in helping farmers to cut back farm production, increase their off-farm work, get realistic repayment schedules with FmHA, and subsequently stay in farming.

In still other cases, the funding is a temporary year-to-year appropriation from federal to state government, which makes long-term planning difficult. Missouri's 1440 program, for example, has received \$480,000 per year for 2 years, but the Heffernans "don't dare count on it." The funding for Michigan's job placement program will run out in June, but unlike the other cases, this program was intended to be temporary. The original aim of the program was to allow farmers, who unlike auto workers were not considered "displaced workers," to become eligible for federally-funded job retraining, and the extension program secured \$1.2 million through the Job Training Partnership Act (Title III). Now other agencies think of foreclosed farmers as displaced workers, and extension's role can return to one of helping farmers to farm.

Funding of a small farm center for the Florida farming systems program has continued, but in 1987 it supported activities for mostly full-time farmers rather than part-time farmers. After a change in program personnel in 1986, there has been no on-farm research; all research has shifted back to the experiment station. At the same time, research on perennial peanuts produced mostly by part-timers with beef cattle was dropped; and station research on vegetables grown by mostly full-timers has expanded.

It is not at all clear why funding for part-time farmer projects is so tenuous. Somehow I may have been inadvertently led to financially troubled projects. It could be that all new projects have financial difficulties, and since I was looking for new part-time farmer projects, I naturally found part-time projects with financial stresses. Or it could be a bias against part-time oriented programs by administrators. Such a bias, if present, may be related to a power imbalance among clientele groups.

Does the situation stem from a decrease in funds appropriated to extension? Not according to Harold Harris of Clemson University, who claims that at national and state levels, funds haven't diminished as much as extension administration would have us believe. In fact, there was a seven percent annual increase in extension appropriations from 1980 to 1986. At the same time, the number of extension FTE's decreased from 17,009 to 15,526, with Community and Rural Development and 4H taking the biggest bites while Agriculture remained the

same. Where has the money gone? Salaries now take up 85 to 90 percent of the total extension budget leaving very little for experimentation with new programs or new clientele groups.

Following Cochrane, I conclude that it is time that a new federal agency be formed to target funds for projects designed especially for the part-time farm and the farm that is in transition from a full-time farm. As Cochrane points out, the elimination of the Commodity Programs, which cost \$26 billion in fiscal 1986, could provide the funding. Extension personnel all over the United States could submit competitive proposals for funding to this agency, which could function like the National Science Foundation or National Institutes of Mental Health. These institutions have set the precedent for awarding federal funds on a competitive basis to professionals who serve the larger society's interests. And clearly, it is in society's interest to safeguard our food supply system and preserve the knowledge of how to farm.

