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# USDA IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Lauren Soth

Iowa State University, in cooperation with the federal Department of Agriculture and the Agricultural History Society, held a symposium this past June at Ames on "The United States Department of Agriculture in Historical Perspective." Professor Richard Lowitt, head of the ISU History Department, and his associates organized a series of formal papers and discussions focused on America's public machinery for agricultural development. Academic historians were mixed with government officials, farmers, agribusiness executives, and a former Secretary of Agriculture, Bob Bergland.

This is not a summation in the sense of adding up the principal points made in the conference. Instead, it is an interpretation of the described changes and trends in the federal Department of Agriculture and the associated Land Grant university research

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and extension establishments. Three main conclusions stood out in my mind at the finish:

**First**, "perestroika" (restructuring) of American agriculture is accelerating. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Land Grant university apparatus of scientific research, education, agricultural supply management, food regulation, land-use planning, farm income stabilization, etc., is—slowly—catching up with changes in American agriculture—restructuring itself as well.

**Second**, USDA is no longer a "farmer's department" of the federal government; it is not an industrial agriculture department, and it is not a "family farm" department, despite the continuing political rhetoric.

**Third**, USDA has become a genuine people's department. Wayne Rassmussen, retired chief USDA historian, in an excellent first paper of the conference, discussed the origins and early operations of USDA as a people's department. That meant a farmer's wing of the government in those 1862-1892 days, since most of the population were farmers or closely tied to farming in rural areas. Now, as Rassmussen explained, USDA is a food and fiber agency with a clientele of consumers, food processors, exporters, food marketers, and other agriculture-related institutions—indeed, the whole public. It is not the advocate of a particular segment of the food complex but carries responsibilities for all—including a much greater diversity in the farming sector itself than in the early days of government food-agriculture activity.

An acceleration of change in USDA is coming about, in large part, through the influence of environmental, conservation and public-health movements in the political arena. These pressure groups are moderating and modifying the predominant power of agribusiness on public policy in food and agricultural affairs. The

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papers presented at this conference combined to make this trend clear, without any one historian saying so directly.

The USDA-Land-Grant-agribusiness complex in this country is politically powerful because it has been extraordinarily effective in increasing agricultural production, reducing labor in farming and bringing low-cost food to the public. Its very success in inventing and delivering new farm technology and creating abundance has led to the neglect of externalities, the side-effects. Concentration on more output per acre and per worker has been given priority over environmental quality and human health effects of the new technology, especially the use of chemicals.

The paper by Pete Daniel of the Smithsonian Institution on the USDA's fire-ant eradication program several years ago dramatized the pro-chemical orientation of public policy for agriculture. The revolution in farm-chemical technology after World War II dazzled agronomists and farmers to the degree that they tended to overlook alternative measures of pest and weed control. They and the suppliers of the chemicals sneered at conventional, "primitive" crop-rotation and conservation-tillage practices.

One-track policy for greater output of agricultural products stems from Americans' congenital devotion to bigness and growth, and to science as the engine of growth, which several conference participants noted. Vivian Wiser, a USDA historian, remarked that USDA was the first federal department "focused on science" and quoted a politician's statement that the department (in the early 1900s) had "the finest corps of scientists anywhere in the world." But fire-ant scientific "eradication" not only failed to eradicate, it harmed wildlife and ruined prospects for biological control by natural enemies.

Science and education have been uppermost among USDA-Land Grant activities, but they have never been immune from political influences. Land use policy, forestry, food safety, conservation and all other functions of the governmental food-agriculture apparatus have been subject to political bargaining, as the historians in this conference explained.

In spite of the Mount Weather, NC agreements in the late 1930s among top USDA and Land Grant officials to separate out the "action" programs of USDA, such as crop controls and price supports, from "pure" scientific and educational work, the separation never has been complete—even for the federal-state research and extension activities. Any governmental system of agricultural development is of course subject to political control, and in a democracy that means responsiveness to popular influences and pressures.

USDA's exposure to politics beyond scientific and educational pressures intensified in the 1920s and 1930s. Donald L. Winters of Vanderbilt University and Richard S. Kirkendall of the University of Washington reviewed the Henry C. and Henry A. Wallaces' important roles as secretaries of agriculture. The untoward consequences of agricultural-production success became so apparent that federal action was undertaken to manage supply and protect farmers from their abundance. Historians Winters and Kirkendall ably described the contradictory approaches of the federal government in those years: trying to hold back output on the one hand and trying to increase output on the other. This contradiction has continued.

But now aroused concerns about deterioration of the public's land and water resources and the dangers to human health from reckless use of chemicals are beginning to reconcile the contra-

diction. The historical reviews at this conference indicate that the nation is facing up to the problems of overcapacity and overinvestment in the agro-industrial complex. People are realizing that churning more output from fewer farm workers and exploitive land use in the short run can be dangerous to food security in the

long run—as well as to recreational and other uses of natural resources and to human health.

Agricultural policy of the future will place less emphasis on total output of the agro-industrial complex and more emphasis on the quality and safety of the nation's food. It will temper the drive toward

industrialized farming and pay more attention to the other sectors—part-time farming, small farming, diversified farming. The people's Department of Agriculture will devote more research and action to rural development and the betterment of non-farm rural life.

Historical analysis of the forces that led to our food abundance helps us understand that the principal beneficiaries of emphasis on total output are the suppliers of farm inputs and the processors and distributors of the end products. The interests of these elements of the food-agriculture system must be taken into account in public policy, of course. They make up 90 percent of the workforce in the system. But maintaining full farm output, which exhausts resources for the future in order to support a large agribusiness complex, does not make sense.

The concerns of the United States about world peace and economic development point toward using our agricultural overcapacity to strengthen food production in the less-developed countries. This is an avenue of export for agribusiness. Steering U.S. public agricultural research toward the needs of the less-developed parts of the world could be a major contribution to national security, at the same time it could help put America's food-agriculture system into better long-term balance.

Hegel, a German philosopher, wrote that "people and governments never have learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced from it." The agricultural historians' conference provided proof of this but also furnished insights that could guide reform of current farm legislation if legislators, farm organization officers, and agribusiness leaders will pay attention.

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***Do You Know That...***

In 1987, according to the U.S. Farm Census, 8 farms in Kansas sold \$686 million of agricultural products—10 percent of all the farm products sold by all (68,579) farmers in the state.

In the United States, 469 farms, with average farm product sales of \$29 million, accounted for 10 percent of 1987 U.S. farm product sales. Fifty percent of all farm sales were made by 75,682 farms. Their sales averaged \$899 thousand. The other farms—2,012,077—accounted for the other 50 percent.

*Contributed by Edward Reinsel, ERS.*