In short ■ by David L. Debertin

Building consumer support for agricultural research and educational programs

In a 1992 *CHOICES* commentary, I discussed the importance of building a broader base of political support for public research and educational programs in agriculture. Here, I explain the reasons why expanding consumer support for agricultural research and educational programs will be difficult.

Agricultural college professionals argue that agricultural research and educational programs are a primary reason why the cost of food (as measured by the percentage of consumer income spent on food) in the U.S. is among the lowest of any country in the world. However, the argument that agricultural research and educational programs should be supported in order to keep food prices low is no longer as viable as it once was.

Consumer needs and demands have changed in dramatic ways, particularly in the last 20-30 years. Agricultural colleges in most states still focus primarily on the development of new production technologies that will further shave a few cents per unit off the production costs for raw agricultural commodities. The goal is both to lower food prices to the consumer and to increase the profitability of farmer-producers. Most consumers are no longer impressed with this success. Here is why.

Consumers are concerned about production costs for raw agricultural commodities only to the extent that these costs influence the prices for the food they purchase—food usually a long way from the farm gate in form and location! A technology that reduces the price of fresh fruits or vegetables consumed "at home" will be noticed more by the consumer than one that affects the cost of grain used in the production of beef or chicken eaten in a frozen dinner, or at a restaurant. The price of restaurant food is affected to a far greater degree by factors such as competition among restaurants and the cost of labor and capital than by the price of the raw agricultural commodities that form the basis for the product.

Colleges of agriculture producing cost-reducing production technologies don't help today's households as much as the ones of 20-30 years ago. Over the past 20-30 years, two-parent households have increasingly dealt with declining real incomes by putting the spouse to work. Time is valuable. With both parents working, the family allocates the food budget in order to spend little time in the kitchen, and more time in other activities, including eating out. Households are smaller. More households now consist of single people living alone. Cost savings from reduced agricultural commodity prices for a family of seven or eight become less important in smaller households. And family members now might seldom prepare and eat a meal together at home.

Consumers want to be certain that their food supply is free of contaminants, both biological and man-made. Any new technology (for example, milk production employing bST) is viewed with skepticism. Too frequently, so-called experts (including agricultural scientists!) have sought to assure consumers that a new drug, pesticide, or whatever is "perfectly safe," only to later find evidence that the product was not as safe as was believed. Consumers often have good reasons for being skeptical of the latest developments by agricultural scientists, especially when these developments affect the products they eat!

Many agricultural scientists remain convinced that consumers will provide political support for agricultural research and education if they can develop technologies that further reduce the price of milk, raw meat, or wheat for flour. But these comparatively

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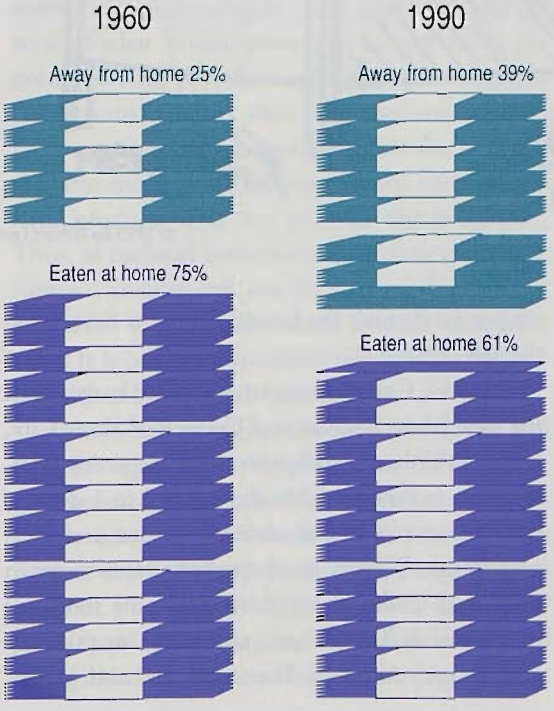
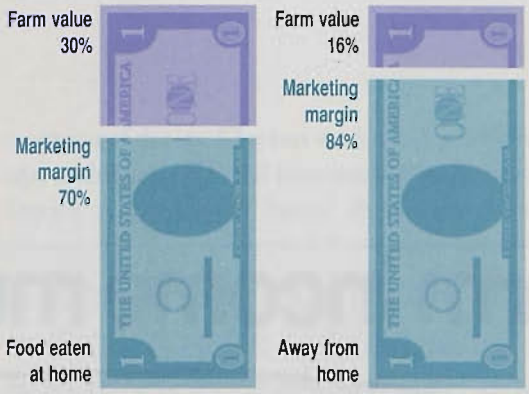
unprocessed agricultural commodities (where the reduced-price-to-consumer benefits of new technology would be most apparent) now represent only a small portion of most consumers' food budgets. Nowadays, it is not as important to most consumers whether raw hamburger is selling for $1.69 or $1.89 a pound. The important issue is which pizza place has the lowest price for delivery of two medium pizzas. This price is primarily determined by competition among the pizza restaurants and labor costs, but only to a small degree by price of raw hamburger, the milk in the cheese, the wheat in the crust, or the tomatoes in the sauce.

If the agricultural research and educational system has been slow to recognize the changes that have taken place in consumers, it has been even slower to make adjustments in an effort to allocate more effort toward issues of consumer concern. Mistakes have been made in attempting to build program support from consumers. For example, in many instances, concerns expressed by consumers about the potential safety of an agricultural production technology are met with strident efforts by agricultural science experts to "educate" consumers—that is, to reassure consumers that the production technology is "perfectly safe" for the food supply.

Consumers might be more willing to provide political support if the agricultural research and educational system devoted increasing efforts toward improving the quality of processed foods or reduced processing costs. Furthermore, if there are significant numbers of consumers who desire food produced without pesticides and chemical fertilizers, the system has a responsibility to develop the technologies that can accomplish this!





The farmers' share of the food dollar for food eaten at home and away from home

Agricultural administrators fear that an increased focus on consumer concerns will alienate the core traditional base of support for public agricultural research and education—the medium-size commercial farmers. Commercial farmers want colleges of agriculture to educate consumers about the safety of current production technologies employing drugs and chemicals. Consumers see colleges of agriculture not as unbiased sources of information regarding food safety, but instead influenced by the special interests of commercial farmers and agricultural chemical and drug producers.

The public agricultural research and educational system needs to adjust to the changed demands and concerns of the consumer, and not expect consumers to adjust. All consumers, not just farmers, are the "ultimate" clientele of colleges of agriculture. In the coming years, there will be increasing conflicts between what commercial farmers think they want from the agricultural research and educational system and what consumers want. Colleges of agriculture cannot hope to build a strong base of support with consumers without alienating to a degree this traditional support from commercial farmers. ◘