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# Training in Sustainable Agriculture

## IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY

By Neill Schaller

I commend Hoag and Pasour for examining the wisdom of training Cooperative Extension Service agents in sustainable agriculture (SA). However, I disagree with their conclusion that such training is unwarranted and would compromise the objectivity of the Extension Service. In my judgment, the authors' reasoning is based on highly questionable, if not irrelevant, assumptions about both sustainable agriculture and the role of Extension. They argue that sustainable agriculture is unprofitable, and therefore should not be encouraged, that research on the subject is inadequate, and that the concept is too imprecise. In fact, the reasons they think Extension should not be trained in SA are, I believe, justification for exactly that kind of training.

### Profitability

Take their assumption that sustainable agriculture is unprofitable. The authors, surprisingly, do not agree with the view prevailing today that profitability is one of the requirements for the sustainability of agriculture, in addition to being productive, environmentally beneficial, and socially acceptable. Simply put, it doesn't make sense for Hoag and Pasour to say, sustainable agriculture, by definition, is unprofitable.

My concern goes beyond the matter of definition. We are told that "research studies all across the country consistently show sustainable agriculture systems to be less profitable" (than conventional systems). This statement is inconsistent with the authors' second reason why Extension training in sustainable agriculture would be a mistake, that is, the lack of research-based information. Moreover, such a sweeping, undocumented assessment is no more convincing than the counter claim one might hear that sustainable agriculture is in fact

I acknowledge the importance of profitability. But whether one farming system is more or less profitable than another may be more of a smoke screen than an answerable question. What is profit, anyway, and how is it measured? Proponents of sustainable agriculture rightfully point out that because the traditional calculation of farm profits fails to count numerous benefits and costs experienced by farmers and other affected people today and in the future, the indicator itself is a big part of the problem.

It is precisely because the relative profitability of different farming systems is difficult to measure that Extension agents should be trained in sustainable agriculture. In addition to providing farmers with reliable facts and information on sustainable practices, Extension agents should be helping farmers discover, create, interpret, and wisely use, as they see fit, the best available information about sustainable agriculture.

The farm bill authorization for agent training has just that role in mind when it refers to a program that will assist in developing farmer-to-farmer information exchange networks, help coordinate farm tours and field days, and encourage farmer input into research and education programs—as well as provide technical assistance to individual farmers.

### Research Base

Similarly, I question the authors' second assumption, that Extension should not teach sustainable agriculture because the research-based information on sustainable agriculture is inadequate. Infor-

mation is lacking in some areas. But I disagree with their conclusion that Extension should therefore wait until much more information is available. In fact, Extension agents trained in sustainable agriculture may be the key to increased availability of information on sustainable farming systems. Because they interact directly with farmers, Extension agents are in a position to effectively communicate to researchers farmers' questions and problems requiring research. Thus, Extension agents could help revitalize, if not restore, the vital links between Extension and research in the land grant system.

### The Concept

The authors' third assumption is that because the concept of sustainable agriculture is "loose and imprecise," it is not something Extension should be involved in. True, different people define sustainable agriculture differently. And yes, there are conflicts and trade-offs involved in what most people mean by agricultural sustainability—between productivity, profitability, conservation, environmental protection, and health and safety, as well as social goals. But rather than view those differences, conflicts, and trade-offs as reasons for Extension to avoid the subject, I see them as compelling arguments for it to be more usefully involved. Hence, the need for agent training.

The latter interpretation is hardly new. Imagine if the Extension Service in earlier decades had followed the authors' advice to steer clear of "loose and imprecise" subjects. I suppose it would have abstained from helping farmers decide whether and how to substitute tractors for horses and chemicals for labor. Moreover, if Extension should avoid subjects people define differently, how could one justify its educational involvement in fields such as rural community development, resource conservation, and more recently, youth at risk?

### Implications

Finally, I note with disappointment the authors' closing comment about the implications of all of this for agricultural economists and land grant universities.

Economists, we are told, "can make an important contribution to the public policy debate by emphasizing the potential problems and pitfalls for the land grant system in supporting sustainable agriculture...." I agree, economists should be bearers of unpleasant as well as pleasant truths, but are we to understand that perhaps their most noble charge is to keep the land grant colleges out of trouble?

Even more disturbing is the authors' description of sustainable agriculture as "a concept that has not been clearly defined and whose social value remains to be demonstrated." If the message here is that the land grant system must address such issues wisely, I have no quarrel. But the tone of the statement, indeed of most of the article, is that new or different ideals and ideas, such as sustainable agriculture, are guilty until proven innocent (while presumably conventional agriculture is innocent until proven guilty).

I can think of no better philosophy to guide the land grant system, including Extension, if its purpose is to defend the status quo, to protect the interests of the traditional agricultural community, and to discourage imaginative new thinking. But that is not the reason the system was created. Regrettably, the article comes across to me not as a plea for intelligent caution, but rather as a prescription for the unsustainability of the land grant system. I hope I have misinterpreted its message.



*Dr. Neill Schaller is Associate Director of the Institute for Alternative Agriculture, Inc., Greenbelt, Maryland.*