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The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research: **Oris V. Wells' Journal Turns 40**

Rex F. Daly

The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research was started in 1949 by Oris V. Wells who had become Director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) in 1946. The Journal was to serve the BAE staff as a medium "for the publication of technical articles."

Wells was a farm boy who in 1929 came to the BAE as a junior economist shortly after graduation from New Mexico's College of Agriculture. He moved up rapidly in BAE, from a successful technician into supervisory and administrative assignments, advancing to the top of the civil service ladder. With his shift to the new Agricultural Adjustment Administration in the mid-thirties, and throughout the rest of his career, Wells became heavily involved in agricultural policy issues.

I am sure that history will judge Oris Wells as one of USDA's giants and a leader in the development and analysis of U.S. agricultural policy. He was a voracious reader and a good technical economist with the memory of an elephant for economic situations and facts. He was a most perceptive and politically astute analyst of the politics of economics as well as an effective and much sought-after speaker. These skills and his broad grasp of the underlying facts made him a master at cutting through the verbiage to important problems and in getting understanding and agreement on these problems.

Wells served as an economic and policy adviser to Secretaries of Agriculture and to representatives of agriculture in the U.S. Congress for more than a quarter century. In my judgment, he was the ablest and strongest administrator to pass through USDA during my tenure there. I believe that most of his peers would agree.

Wells' guidance on journal policy and on the articles published has transcended developments in the agricultural economics discipline, for example, farm-nonfarm trends and the role of agriculture, education and train-

ing, and international development. He had a major influence on the Journal in his time, which is reflected in the way we communicate today. Even though the Journal has survived many changes in the administration of economic research, its general objectives and editorial policy continue much along the lines he originally suggested.

Its articles still cover progress and findings in research and new methods and techniques, but there have been changes. It is interesting that Wells thought the State Statisticians and members of their staffs should be a major source of articles on research methods and techniques. He was also firm in excluding articles dealing directly with agricultural policy.

The scope of agricultural economics, in Wells' view, included the entire fields of agricultural estimates and statistics, rural social studies, and research on prices, marketing, land economics, farm finance, and farm management. His price analysis research undoubtedly included demand analyses, food demand and consumption studies, and perhaps even commodity analysis systems. Farm management activities would probably include research on the production response in agriculture. But would the discipline have anticipated farm management born again as farming systems research?

As the Nation becomes largely urban, few graduates in agricultural economics have first-hand knowledge of the increasingly complex agricultural industry. Moreover, with rapid developments in technology, even the experienced researcher can quickly become illiterate about the practical and institutional developments in agriculture. As a result, researchers often feel more comfortable with methodology and techniques, and they may get more professional points for such articles than for those that offer practical applications of research results to problems, address policy issues, or provide outlook assessments for agriculture.

In economic development activities, one finds that recent graduates (whether trained in general economics or in agricultural economics) know little about agriculture and its role in the economies of developing nations. In

The author was formerly director of the Economic and Statistical Analysis Division, ERS, and chairman of the Outlook and Situation Board, USDA. He was also editor of *Agricultural Economics Research* from 1960 to 1965.

such nations, it is usually the general economist who deals with macroeconomic policy and with issues relating to development. However, economists who do not have experience and agricultural training do not understand that the so-called macroeconomic problems usually originate in agriculture. This knowledge/experience gap creates problems in the programs of donor agencies and in planning for agricultural development, and it limits the effectiveness of our advice to policymakers.

As Wells reminded members of the Journal staff, "agricultural economics work is carried on in the public interest and every researcher or statistician, regardless of his field, does have a responsibility for seeing that his material is prepared in such a way as to be readily accessible to his fellow workers and the public." I think Wells' life work suggests he also meant that research must be readily understood and relevant to public problems and policy issues.

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