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# Anniversary Articles

## The Economic Research Service and *The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research*

John E. Lee, Jr.

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The 40th anniversary of *The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research* is an appropriate time to reflect on its role in the context of its institutional sponsor, the Economic Research Service (ERS). The Journal, approved as a USDA periodical shortly after the end of World War II, was intended as an outlet for contributions by USDA social scientists and cooperators in the land-grant university system. Thus, the Journal's life spans the development of agricultural economics (and, to a lesser extent, the other social sciences) in the postwar decades.

The Journal provides a vehicle for sharing the intermediate products of ERS research with other social scientists. Its objective is to enhance their capacity to produce more effective information and thereby improve the performance of the rural and agricultural sectors. It does that by contributing to the state of the art in economic theory and methods and by reporting new findings about important economic and social relationships.

The Journal's succession of strong editors has built a legacy of high standards, while winning it growing recognition and respect as a premier vehicle for refereed articles on new developments in research methods and theory, new applications of existing theory, and significant new social science research results.

The Journal thus directly supports the mission of ERS providing economic and social science information that will improve the public good by bettering the performance of U.S. agriculture and the rural economy. Some of the components of that statement may need elaboration to show more specifically how the Journal's scientifically rigorous style of articles meshes with the ERS mission.

### Information Defined Broadly

In the context of the ERS mission statement, economic and social science information includes all data (both raw and processed), short-deadline staff analyses, situation and outlook analyses, results of research (from basic to applied), interpretations of data, and forecasts

pertinent to the needs of decisionmakers. The ERS program includes such a variety of information vehicles, not as ends in themselves, but as different means of improving the rural and agricultural economies. Information also encompasses applications of economic logic, arguments and tests of economic theory, and syntheses of existing research and analyses to fit the needs of decisionmakers.

Information provided by ERS deals primarily with economics, but also draws upon sociology, history, law, and, occasionally, political science and the other social sciences. By integrating economics and the other social sciences, ERS can provide an extra dimension to its information, making it more useful for the full range of considerations decisionmakers take into account.

### Providing Information Means More Than Conducting Research

Information is useful only in a context of time, form, quality, and place. Such dimensions vary with the context within which the information is used. Timeliness has one meaning in the context of the articles in the Journal and quite another in the context of short-term staff analyses.

Information published in the Journal tends to be of a "capacity-building" nature. That is, the articles focus on development of improved theory, research methods, and enhanced analytical frameworks. They represent an intermediate step toward improved decisionmaking.

The utility of such information is no less important than for short-term staff work. It is simply different. In every case, information must be timely, relevant to the needs of users, and in the form most useful to the audience.

Information must, of course, be accurate, but the degree of accuracy varies with the needs of specific decisionmakers. For some, quantitative accuracy in great detail is most useful. Others may want only the basic directions and orders of magnitude.

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The author is the administrator of ERS.

Much good research and analysis are wasted because the results are not clearly communicated and are, therefore, misunderstood or misused. Much of the "comment and response" in professional literature represents such miscommunication rather than substantive disagreement. Lack of clarity in communicating is costly in terms of both wasted resources and reduced effectiveness.

"Providing information" means doing more than conducting research and analyses and generating data. It means interpreting and reporting the results of research to make those results useful. It means not only providing information with the most useful time, place, form, and quality characteristics, but also helping others understand, interpret, and use it. Because users of ERS information range from decisionmakers to econometricians to public policymakers, ERS distills its information into a variety of forms to reach those varied audiences. The Journal is one such vehicle. Through other vehicles ERS helps extension agents and others engaged in providing public policy education and in advising farmers, agribusinesses, and rural leaders.

### **Performance As It Relates to Achieving Society's Goals**

The performance of the food and fiber system is measured in terms of society's objectives, which include such factors as efficient use of resources, financial well-being of people and industries, fair and equitable distribution of costs and benefits, and human health and safety. Thus, "improved performance" is more than narrow technical efficiency. It encompasses a broader purpose for US agriculture and the rural economy.

Implicit in the ERS mission statement is the assumption that system performance is enhanced if we help individuals—consumers, farmers, agribusinesses, and public policymakers—make more informed choices.

### **Strategy for Achieving ERS Mission**

Because it is difficult to predict the precise information needs of decisionmakers, ERS has chosen, as a strategy for achieving its mission, the development of a "capacity to respond" to specific needs as they arise. Development of such capacity means anticipating broad subject matter areas likely to be important, developing "capital" in the form of enhanced databases, human expertise, and accumulated research results, and developing analytical frameworks (formal and conceptual models as well as enhanced theory and research methods) to apply the "capital" to the information delivery systems.

The decisionmakers to whom ERS information is addressed include both the public officials who set the policy environment and the private decisionmakers. Public officials require information to understand and monitor economic and social phenomena, to formulate public policies with full knowledge of the consequences of alternative courses of action, and to manage programs to achieve policy objectives. Private citizens need similar information to make informed decisions in the economic arena. They also need access to market information and analyses and to other information with "public good" characteristics. ERS provides such information to widen the opportunities for participants in agricultural and rural markets through vehicles like the Journal.

Rural social science researchers and analysts outside ERS are not our clients as is often stated or implied, they are fellow laborers in the vineyard. We all have the ultimate objective of improving the understanding of economic and social relationships and thereby contributing to more effective public and private decisionmaking. As a significant part of the social science community, ERS has a responsibility to contribute to the state of the art in economic theory and methods and to share new findings about important economic and social relationships so as to enhance the capacity of the profession at large. The Journal is a major vehicle for that sharing.