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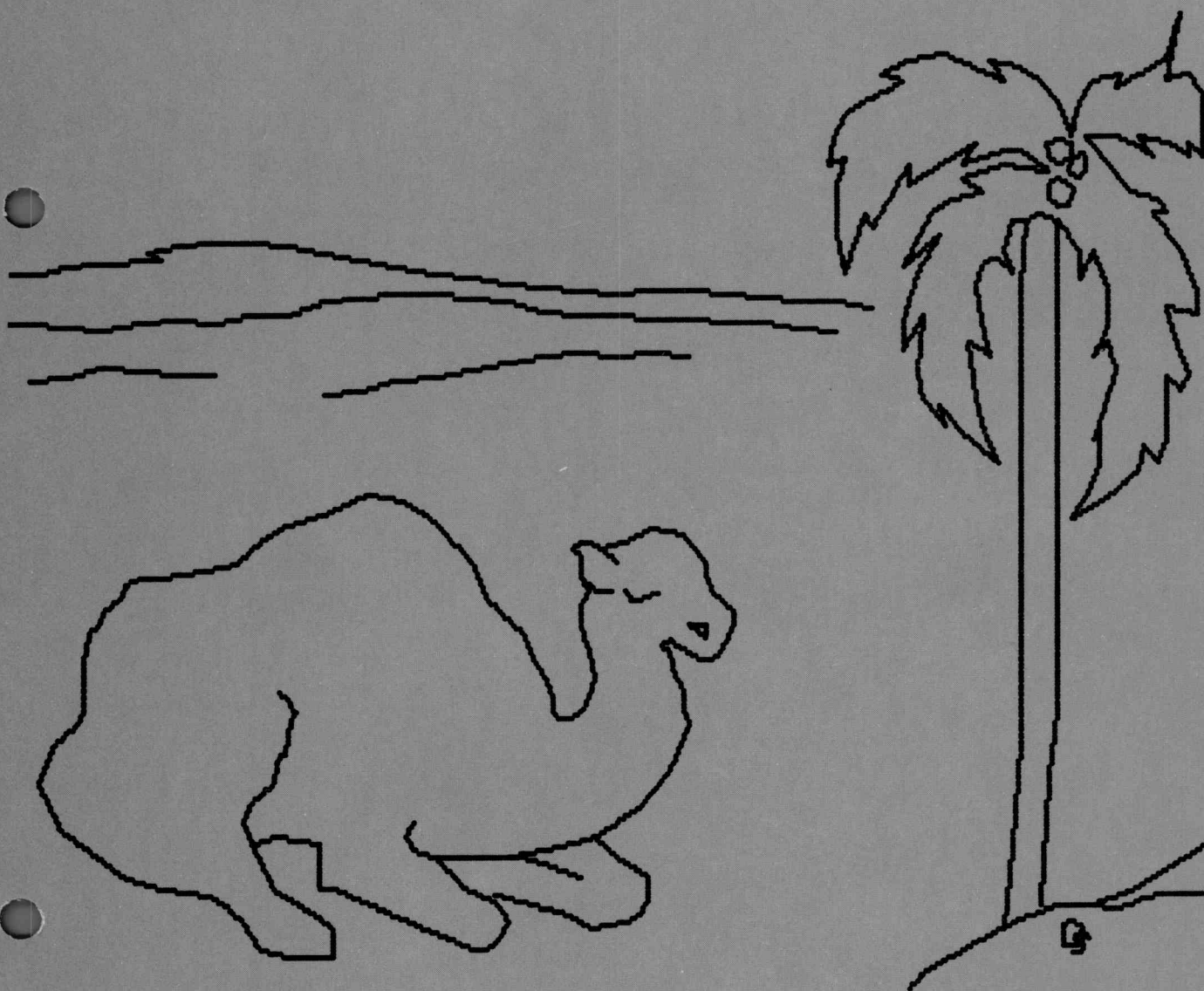
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# AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS RESEARCH

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OASIS: an information system  
pp. 1-19



# Agricultural Economics Research

A Journal of the U.S. Department of Agriculture • Economics, Statistics, and Cooperatives Service

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"The dry-as-dust soil of Upper Egypt yields . . . minute information regarding local methods of agriculture, manufacture, trade, and public administration," says Arnold Toynbee in Volume I of his *Study of History* as he expresses concern that historians have expended considerable energy studying the ancient Egyptian civilization simply because the data are there. We have pieced together relatively little information from scattered coins, inscriptions, and literary records on the contemporaneous civilization of the Seleucids in Asia. For nearly two centuries, the Seleucid Monarchy was, according to Toynbee, the greatest field of creative activity that existed in the world. The Egyptian civilization was comparatively unfruitful. Owing, however, to a climatic accident, the amount of raw information on these two monarchies happens to be accessible to us in inverse ratio to their intrinsic importance in history. Scholars are forever prone, apparently, to study problems for which they have data instead of problems which are important.

This issue of *Agricultural Economics Research* focuses on computer-based data systems USDA economists use in their outlook and situation work. In these days of clever acronyms, the computer system for storing, retrieving, reporting, and analyzing data is called OASIS: *Outlook and Situation Information System*.

USDA is not the only Federal agency building computer-based data systems. The December 1976 issue of the *Statistical Reporter* contains an article called "User Access-Data Banks." The author points out that most agencies in the Federal Government which are engaged in extensive statistical work use electronic computers for this task.

This wide acceptance of electronic data processing equipment and the increasing demand for statistics for research and policy formation have resulted not only in a growing volume of statistics from these agencies, but also in a new storage medium, the machine-readable data file. Easy access to computerized data files, adds the author of the *Statistical Reporter* article, is essential for research, policy formulation, and publication. The article contains a description of the Bureau of Labor Statistics' machine-readable data bank, which includes

the consumer and wholesale prices indexes and information on the labor force. Also mentioned are a listing entitled "Computer Tape/Files Available from the Bureau of the Census" and a National Technical Information Service "Directory of Computerized Data Files and Related Software." Other agencies with computerized data files include the Social Security Administration, National Center for Education Statistics, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, and the National Archives and Records Service. Thus, USDA was not the first Federal agency to build a computerized data system, and it will not be the last.

The authors of the first article in this issue of the Journal describe the agricultural outlook and situation process in USDA, and they explain how a computer-based data retrieval and analysis system can improve the quality and quantity of reports. They also offer some interesting "behind-the-scenes" insights into task force behavior. The topic of an agricultural statistics data base was addressed in another issue of the *Statistical Reporter* (November 1977), and major users of these statistics were identified. The article is called "A Framework for Planning U.S. Federal Statistics, 1978-1989."

In the second article of the Journal, the writers explain how data are stored and how a generalized, user-oriented operating system makes it easy to produce reports or perform economic analyses. The third article consists of a set of four short notes chosen as examples of computerized data systems in USDA other than OASIS.

Let us hope that the right data are going into these several systems because, right or wrong, according to Toynbee's observation, these are the data USDA analysts will be using in their agricultural economics research. Toynbee concludes his observation on the tendency of the potter to become the slave of his clay with an analogy which points to a corrective. The successful industrialist, he notes, perceives a demand for a commodity and then lays his hands on the raw material which will meet that demand efficiently. In other words, the industrialist is a master of resources, not their slave.

CLARK EDWARDS

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On January 1, 1978, three USDA agencies—the Economic Research Service, the Statistical Reporting Service, and the Farmer Cooperative Service—merged into a new organization, the Economics, Statistics, and Cooperatives Service.

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# American

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# Agricultural

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Articles: Kilmer and Hahn, "Market-Share and Anti-Merger Policies"; Pinstrup-Andersen and Caicedo, "Income Distribution and Nutrition"; Dillon and Scandizzo, "Measurement of Attitudes Toward Risk"; DeBoer and Chandra, "Crop Selection for Semi-Subsistence Farms"; Moffitt, Zilberman, and Just, "A 'Putty-Clay' Application to Pollution"; Talpaz, Curry, Sharpe, DeMichele, and Frisbie, "Optimal Pesticide Application on Cotton"; Rausser, "Control Theory and Policy"; Hillman, "Nontariff Barriers"; Notes: Burt, "On the Statistical Estimation of Isoquants"; Fomby and Hill, "Principal Components Regression"; Traill, Colman, and Young, "Estimating Irreversible Supply Functions." Plus more Articles, Notes, Book Reviews, and News.

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