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RESEARCH AND EXTENSION NEEDS OF SMALL FARMERS

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For nearly 30 years small scale farming generally was considered inefficient and undesirable. Operators of farms found it increasingly difficult to compete with large farm operators in the market place because of insufficient product quantity, the seasonal structure of their production, and lack of marketing information. During this period, large commercial farms moved to higher levels of management sophistication and use of modern production technology. The market system also became more sophisticated because of mass marketing of agricultural products, monocultural production techniques and highly advanced assembly and distribution systems.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s it became evident that food buying behavior of consumers across the nation was changing. Food buying clubs and consumer cooperatives began to emerge as food prices increased. Also, many consumer food preferences changed, with quality factors such as freshness and taste, growing methods and packaging, and nutrition becoming important to more people. Produce obtained directly from farms often satisfied this new consumer desire. As a result, direct sales from farm to consumer became recognized as an important opportunity for the small scale farmer in the struggle for economic viability.

Interest in small scale farmers and their problems became prominent in the Northeast during the mid 1970s. In Maine, the Cooperative Extension Service joined with the Maine Department of Agriculture to propose specific direct marketing programs to assist small farms. The Maine Department of Agriculture also recently began printing and distributing a weekly newsletter entitled *Mainely Agriculture*, which contains prices of vegetables sold wholesale and at roadside stands and price ranges for livestock sold at various Maine livestock auctions. In 1978 a regional small farmer conference in Maine was sponsored by the U.S.D.A., C.S.A., and ACTION to hear small farm delegates speak about their specific problems and concerns. As a result of this conference, a plan to improve small farm programs was formulated and approved by Maine's Rural Development Committee.

On the national level, at the initiation of the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, ten public meetings have been scheduled across the country to gather information on the structure of agriculture. This information will be used in the formulation of farm policy in 1981. One area of particular concern is the viability of small farms and their role in agriculture and rural communities in coming years.

Although problems of small scale farming have been widely recognized and discussed, no comprehensive plan to identify and document small scale farmers in Maine has been undertaken. As the initial step toward establishing a data base and guide for future research and extension service to small farms, a survey of Maine's small farm organizations was conducted. The primary objectives in questioning the leaders of Maine's small farm organizations were to determine: (1) their opinions as to what constitutes an appropriate definition of a small farm, (2) major research needs as they perceive them, (3) if they maintain a membership list and would make it

available to University research and extension personnel, and (4) their expected level of cooperation and financial support on future University extension and research.

The responses to the question on the definition of a small farm are shown in Table 1. The responses are distributed bimodally, with the most preferred definitions being (1) a farmer who provides most of the labor and management on the farm, has a family income from farm and non-farm sources that is below Maine's median income, and depends on farming for a significant portion of the family income, and (2) anybody who thinks he is a small farmer. These definitions accounted for 39.1 and 34.8 percent of all responses, respectively. It is noteworthy that many respondents favored a modified version of definition (1) above. For instance, several respondents suggested omitting the requirement that family income from farm and non-farm sources be below Maine's median income. Another similar modification suggested was the same as the latter, only substituting in its place the requirement that gross farm sales be under \$40,000. When these suggestions are incorporated into definition (1), the following general criterion for defining a small scale farmer in Maine emerges: a farmer who provides most of the labor and management on the farm, has family income from farm and non-farm sources (with farm gross sales below \$40,000), and depends on farming for the major portion of the family income. Although \$40,000 is a somewhat arbitrary monetary measure, it is presently being used as a threshold level in other studies to separate small from large, commercial farms. However, as prices rise, this figure will have to be adjusted accordingly.

Table 1
The Percentage of Respondents Indicating Preference for a Specific Small Farm Definition

Phrases	Percent
A farmer who provides most of the labor and management on his farm has a family income from farm and non-farm sources that is below Maine's median income, and depends on farming for a significant portion of his income	39.1
Anybody who thinks he is a small farmer	34.8
Any farmer with gross sales under \$20,000	13.0
Other	8.7
Any farmer with gross sales under \$40,000	4.4
Total	100.0

The leaders of the various small farm organizations shared similar opinions when asked to rank the major research needs of small farmers. They cited optimum farm management techniques and product marketing as the more important areas in need of further research and dissemination to small scale farmers. As shown in Table 2, when these two areas are considered together, they account for over 80 percent of the priority research responses. Also mentioned were the need to improve the delivery of technical assistance to the farm and to more thoroughly analyze both federal and state agricultural policies as they pertain to small farms.

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Table 2
Research Priorities Indicated by Maine's Small Farm
Organizations

Priorities	Percentage of Responses
Optimum Farm Management	49.3
Marketing	32.8
Provision of Better Information Systems	10.4
Analysis of Federal and State Agricultural Policies on Small Farmers	7.5
Total	100.0

Several examples of suggested specific research topics within the farm management area are: determination of efficient, small scale technology (i.e., type and size of equipment, etc.) suitable for specific sizes and types of small farms; determination of optimum enterprise combinations for small, diversified farms, economic evaluation of organic cultural practices. The respondents also suggested the following specific research topics in the marketing area: development of purchasing and marketing cooperatives; examination and evaluation of product storage and processing alternatives; development of direct farm to retail marketing outlets.

The number of farm organizations that both maintain a membership list and would be willing to make it available to university researchers was somewhat discouraging. Only 34 percent of all organizations indicated having a mailing list. Of this group, only approximately one-half indicated that they would make it available to university researchers. In some cases, confidentiality requirements prevent organizations from releasing membership lists. However, 54 percent of the remaining organizations with a mailing list did indicate willingness to conduct a mailing for researchers. In summary, direct or indirect access to mailing lists

was available from only 27 percent of the small farm organizations polled.

When asked whether their organizations would consider financially cooperating with other groups to support small farm research, only one-quarter of the leaders responded affirmatively. Most groups are simply too small to fund outside research, although some indicated a willingness to discuss a low level of funding. Of these latter organizations, many would require that their contribution be used to research their own product(s).

In summary, the compilation and analysis of questionnaire responses revealed several findings. First, a widely acceptable definition of a small farm in Maine is one where the operator provides most of the labor and management on the farm, has family income from farm and non-farm sources (with farm gross sales below \$40,000), and depends on farming for the major portion of his income. Second, the research priorities of small farmers lie in the areas of optimum farm management techniques and product marketing. Third, only one-quarter of the small farm organizations polled would provide either direct or indirect access to their mailing lists. Finally, only one-quarter of the organizations were willing to consider financially cooperating with other groups to support small farm research.

It can be concluded that in order to meet the research and Extension needs of Maine's small farm operators, a comprehensive inventory of the small farm population is required. This inventory should include a detailed description of individual farm and socio-economic characteristics and needs. These data, in turn, should be classified by type and size of farm. Such a farm typology would provide a data base for more meaningful research and more focused Extension programs.

Since small farm organizations have very limited financial bases, it can be concluded that external funding will be required to conduct small farm research and Extension programs. Federal and state financial assistance should be sought for these purposes when available.