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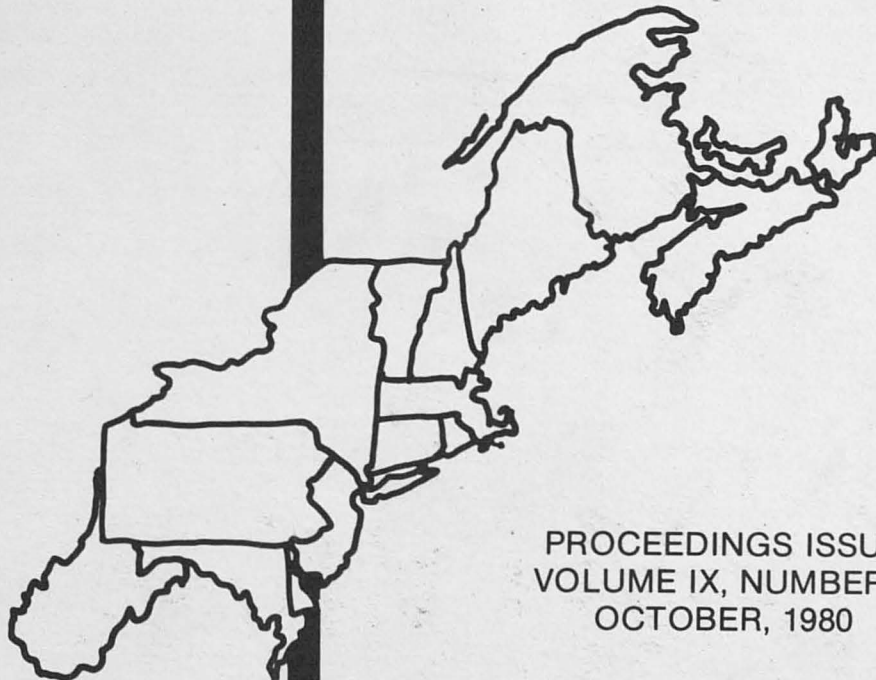
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NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH IN THE 1980's

Robert O. Sinclair

As we enter a new decade, it seems logical to take stock of the state of our profession and to attempt to assess where we may be heading and what we may be doing in the years ahead. It may be less logical or enlightening to ask a research administrator to make this assessment. Furthermore, I believe that researchers themselves should be identifying the problems and mapping out the new directions. However, there will be certain institutional constraints that will play a significant role in your ability to carry out our research mission; and it is to these constraints that I wish to speak first.

THE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT FOR RESEARCH

Since the passage of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977, and specifically Title XIV of that Act, we have been operating under a new set of program planning policies. Essentially, Title XIV, The National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977, directed the Secretary of Agriculture to "Coordinate all agricultural research, extension, and teaching activity conducted or financed by the Department of Agriculture . . ." and to "Take the initiative in establishing coordination of state-federal cooperative agricultural research, extension and teaching programs, funded in *whole or in part* by the Department of Agriculture in each state through the administrative heads of the land grant colleges and universities and the state directors of agricultural experiment stations and cooperative extension services . . ."

To aid in coordination, the Act provided for the establishment of the Joint Council on Food and Agricultural Sciences, to assist the Secretary to coordinate these programs and to establish priorities in research, extension and teaching programs.

The Act also established the National Agricultural Research and Extension Users' Advisory Board with designated members from various users' groups. The Users' Advisory Board was to develop and present a non-establishment viewpoint on programs and priorities.

The Secretary was also instructed to develop a program of competitive grants for basic research in areas in the national interest.

In order to facilitate the coordination mandated by Congress, the USDA went through a reorganization in which the Science and Education Administration (SEA) was created. SEA includes Agricultural Research (AR), Cooperative Research (CR), Extension, an Office for Higher Education, Technical Information Systems (TIS), The Human Nutrition Center, Joint Planning and Evaluation (JPE), and several support offices. The deputy directors of each of these agencies report directly to Director Anson Bertrand, who in turn now reports to the Secretary.

I need not remind anyone that all Hatch, McIntire-Stennis, and special grant money for the states comes through Cooperative Research, and all Smith-Lever extension funding comes through SEA-Extension. There is no comparable formula funding in higher education.

Let me turn briefly to Joint Planning and Evaluation. This agency originally had three operational staffs: Current and Future Priorities, Program Development and Coordination, and Evaluation and Impact. For a variety of reasons, Current and Future Priorities never really got to function on its original mission, and the staff has now been merged with Evaluation and Impact. Evaluation and Impact's mission is to do evaluative studies that cut across several agencies of SEA. A dean could request EIS to conduct a special review of his research, extension and resident instruction programs; but to my knowledge, few have done so.

The Program Development and Coordination staff, now named the Program Planning staff, has as one of its major functions to develop the "decision units" for budget preparation. The decision units prepare coordinated program budgets for research and extension, and in so doing, establish spending priorities.

Social scientists are relatively scarce, as are people really familiar with the research and extension mission, as viewed from the perspective of the states. Consequently, in my opinion, excessive attention is paid to national planning, national objectives, and centralized decision-making.

The SEA management team is cognizant of this and have "detailed" professional staff from CR and Extension to Beltsville to work with the Program Planning staff. How effective this move will be, remains to be seen.

From the standpoint of social scientists, the present organizational structure leaves much to be desired. Economics, Statistics, and Cooperative Service (ESCS), our Washington counterpart, is outside of SEA. While two or three economists from ESCS are detailed to the Program Planning Staff, and Ken Farrell is a member of the Joint Council, my conclusion is that the social sciences are lacking in influence in the SEA bureaucracy.

The old ARPAC (Agricultural Research Policy Advisory Committee) for research planning has been scrapped. Under the new system, the Joint Council is establishing four regional Joint Councils, each with a research, extension, and higher education planning committee. The Northeast Joint Council has been organized and held its first meeting. They are in the process of establishing the operating committees. No one knows for sure how the system will function or what will be the role of the subject matter Research Program Steering Committees that have been so successful in the Northeast. The whole system terminates in 1982, but it is likely that Congress will reconstitute it.

THE ROLE OF THE SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

In the past, the views of the Secretary of Agriculture on how the Experiment Stations spent their federal dollars probably were not too important. With the present structure and the attempt at centralization of control, the statements of the Secretary become more important.

Let me quote to you some of the more recent pronouncements of Secretary Bergland relating to the federal role in research funding. In response to a question on formula funding by a member of the Users' Advisory Board at their July, 1979, meeting, the Secretary said:

The question is 'What is an appropriate federal role?' We should not be using our federal money to finance research; the benefits of which accrue to the citizens of a state. If the

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taxpayers in a state don't want to finance it, I don't know why I should put federal money into it. I don't think we should put federal money into any enterprise in which the private research world would ordinarily take it on for profit.

Later on, in reference to competitive grants, he said:

I believe in competition, I think it's a good thing, even in the University world. Some of my tenured friends don't agree, but I do think that this kind of pressure tends to keep them on their toes. I know how easy it is to go to sleep; I've seen it happen. We're not going to let it happen. We're going to keep the pressure on.

Finally, let me quote from the Secretary's major policy speech to the professional staff of SEA in January, 1980, on the federal role in agricultural research.

Federal research funds appropriated for the Department of Agriculture's Science and Education Administration's Agricultural Research are to respond to major national priorities. *Within the context of national priorities*, federal funds allocated to the states are to respond to regional and state priorities, while research and extension undertaken with state and county funds are to respond to the specific priorities of the various state and local areas. . . . Agricultural research, and especially research funded with federal dollars, must now respond to national priorities based on new—and often harsh—realities. . . . Those projects that could and should be financed by private enterprise or the states should be closed out. . . . The need to concentrate federal research on such national priority projects has now become clear, and is reflected by the proposed increases in the agricultural research budget for fiscal 1981. I believe the bulk of the additional funds will be used for basic—rather than applied—research.

I believe we will all be significantly affected by the new institutional structures and philosophies of research funding. The states traditionally have emphasized their independence, their belief that, above all, the state research and extension programs must meet the needs of the state constituencies. State Experiment Stations and Extension directors have usually paid little more than lip service to national planning efforts.

In the larger states, where formula funds comprise only 10-20 percent of the total research or extension budgets, they have been independent; and they may be able to maintain this independence in the future. But the small states, where federal funds may make up 45 percent of the Experiment Station budget, are much more vulnerable to attempts by the USDA to influence research or extension priorities, since a threat to cut off or redirect formula funds could have dire results.

And do not doubt that these redirections can occur. If the states do not respond, the federal bureaucracy will gear up to perform the research. Evidence of this are the studies on the structure of agriculture, the small farms initiative, the study of organic farming, and several other projects listed as high priority by the Joint Council.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS FOR THE 1980's

Many conferences have been held and reports prepared outlining new initiatives, directions, or priorities for research in the years to come. Most, unless done exclusively by social scientists, give relatively little support to added research in agricultural or resource economics or rural sociology. The Joint Council, for example, lists 19 areas of emphasis for the next five years, only 5 of which have any significant social science orientation.

The Users' Advisory Board was more generous to the social sciences, and a strong economic/rural sociology orientation ran through most of their research and extension priorities. It is ironic, but reassuring, that the non-establishment, and generally more critical advisory group, is the one that most strongly endorses social science research.

So, what should agricultural economists be doing in the decade ahead, and what support can they expect? Let's look first at the level of support.

A. Federal

The land-grant colleges are victims of their own arguments; for years we have fought for the independence to develop our own research and extension priorities based on the argument that since federal support was such a small part of the total, the federal government should not expect to dictate priorities. Now, Congress and the USDA are saying, "You don't really need this marginal support. If we have to cut budgets, we'll cut from the appropriations to the states."

Competitive grants will be an increasing part of the total federal research dollar, and these are not likely to be for social science research. Furthermore, agricultural research is not high on the priority list for increased appropriations; and we will be very lucky if the federal appropriations keeps up with inflation.

B. State, Industry and Commodity Groups

If there are to be real increases, they will have to come from here. The paucity of research support will require us to be more selective, more specialized, and to recognize the spillover effects. Not all states need research all problems.

C. Some of My Research Priorities Include:

1. Greater emphasis on multi- or cross-disciplinary research—a systems approach. This may offer a chance to tie to noneconomic funding sources, especially in energy research.

2. Investigate resource allocation by nonmarket means, especially for energy inputs; but for land, the market may not be the only or even the best way to transfer title to this resource, especially in the Northeast.

3. The whole fresh fruit and vegetable production—marketing system needs a hard look and not just the economic implications, although these are important.

4. We have passed through an industrial revolution and a technological evolution in agriculture. Now, we are entering a revolution in communications and in decision-making. How are farmers and rural residents going to receive maximum benefit from this new technology?

5. We need to question whether the uncontrolled market gives the income distribution and structure of agriculture what we really want. Perhaps, we should look at the Canadian model for dairy and poultry, for example.

6. We need further analysis of the market structure and the effects of the presumed decline in competition on producers and consumers.

7. We should be showing a greater concern for consumer interests.

8. Finally, our research efforts should demonstrate a greater concern for the needs of the people; and the impacts of our technology on rural people and communities.