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# SETTING THE STAGE--A BRIEF HISTORY OF EXTENSION ACCOUNTABILITY

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The National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977<sup>1</sup> astonished the leadership of the national cooperative extension system by requiring "... an evaluation of the economic and social consequences of the programs of the extension service and the cooperative extension services." The federal Extension Service (ES-USDA) was "shocked." Extension thought everybody knew it did good things for its vast clientele and, therefore, it was chagrined to be legislatively mandated to state the worth of its programs.

Initially, extension thought such an effort would be easy. Did not it have all these success stories? Well, yes, but, we did not have success stories in a scientifically defensible form. In fact, the extension system was ill-prepared to say very much at all about social and economic consequences. After spluttering a while about the nerve of young congressional staffers and Office of Management and Budget whipper-snappers (who were so ignorant of the contributions of extension), extension set out to do the best it could. Some two years and \$1.5 million dollars later, it presented a report to satisfy the legislative requirement. The report did not say very much about social and economic consequences.

The Extension Committee on Policy (ECOP) and the federal ES-USDA leadership vowed to never again get caught in that kind of situation. Extension would design and implement a first-class accountability and reporting system which would, coupled with a strengthened, state-of-the-art evaluation system, produce the

kind of accountability information its national (and even then, increasingly state) fund providers needed to determine the worthiness of its programs.

Extension designed the system, but it did not implement it. The commitment to evaluation was forgotten. We started to follow some of these things, but leadership changed, the pressure eased and business as usual continued.

Meanwhile, extension got additional constant legislative encouragement. The Agriculture and Food Act of 1981 (P.L. 97-98) actually required USDA program evaluations:

"section 1471 (a) The Secretary SHALL regularly conduct program evaluations ... to improve the administration and effectiveness of agricultural research, extension, and teaching programs in achieving their stated objectives. (b) The Secretary is AUTHORIZED to encourage and foster the regular evaluation of agricultural research, extension, and teaching programs within the State agricultural experiment stations, cooperative extension services, and colleges and universities, through the development and support of cooperative evaluation programs and program evaluation centers and institutes." We ignored this.

<sup>1</sup> Congress passed the National Agricultural Research, Extension and Teaching Policy Act as Title XIV of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 (P.L. 95-113).

Then, in 1993, primarily in response to budget deficit concerns and increasing competition for scarce federal dollars, Congress passed the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) (P.L. 103-62). Affecting all federal and cooperating agencies, GPRA requires that program purposes and expected outcomes be identified and that measures be developed to determine these outcomes. As some have observed, GPRA represents a major shift in thinking about accountability for many managers—a shifting of focus away from managing inputs to managing for performance.

We could not completely dodge GPRA, but thanks primarily to research directors who had never had even the brief skirmish with mandated accountability that extension had, its initial efforts are so watered down as to provide very little real, useful accountability data—especially where the social sciences are concerned.

Later, the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-127) required the secretary of agriculture to be more accountable: “... (the secretary) SHALL develop and carry out a system to monitor and evaluate agricultural research and extension activities conducted or supported by (USDA)... to measure the impact and effectiveness of research, extension, and education programs according to the priorities, goals, and mandates established by law....” “CSREES has largely ignored that, too, until now.

Currently, there is the Agricultural Research, Extension and Education Reauthorization Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-185) which has many provisions that are designed to increase accountability at all levels of the system.