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WHAT CAN THE ECONOMIST DO AND NOT DO IN THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS?

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ABSTRACT

The roles of land grant university economists in the public policy process are shaped by the purpose, principles and practice of policy extension education, the interface of policy extension and research, and the economist's tool kit. Land grant extension and research can meet the growing need for knowledge and understanding of public problems and policy solutions if they strive to maintain objectivity, continue to serve a broad public, ensure a strong extension-research partnership, and make wise use of the economist's expanding tool kit.

The Public Policy Process

My assignment first calls for answering two other questions: What is public policy and how is it made? As a start, it helps to distinguish between private and public policies. Private policies are made by individuals, groups, or even governments, to achieve a particular benefit for specific persons or groups. Public policies, in contrast, are made by society, or an important segment of it, and arise in either of two ways:

First, society sees a problem or issue as a public affair requiring public or governmental action. For instance, people have long viewed farm problems as public problems and government intervention as an appropriate response. Second, public policy often develops in reaction to spillover effects of private policies (House). In this case, people who are "spilled upon," or fear that they will be, seek to block the private action or alter its consequences through public policy.

Examples of spillover effects are commonplace in an interdependent society such as ours. A farmer's neighbor complains when the farmer hires a crop duster to spray insecticides on his fields. Landowners object because a government lending agency depresses land prices by selling land it had acquired through foreclosures.

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Policies and programs

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Public policies, as a rule, are developed and carried out through governments, and therefore in ways determined by the type of government in effect. In a country with representative, democratic government such as ours, public policies are made in a participatory way. That is, they represent the interests of citizens involved or affected, and the majority rules (Spitze, August 1986, p. 2).

The dynamic properties of the public policy process are well described in what Charles Gratto has called the "policy issue cycle" (p. 40). Figure 1 shows a simplified version of that cycle, with the following stages:

Concerns expressed--People begin to feel or fear a problem or "hurt" due to some public problem or to adverse effects of private action. The failure of past policies to solve an earlier problem, or effects of policies to resolve an entirely different problem, may cause those concerns.

Issue identified and debated--Concerns evolve into an identifiable issue which is discussed and debated, often with information of mixed reliability and rising emotions.

Alternative solutions considered--This stage is marked by the identification and discussion of alternative policy solutions, the increasing availability of facts and information (and misinformation) about the alternatives and their likely consequences for people affected by the issue.

Action taken--Here the policy debate moves to action, such as the passing of a law or steps taken by the executive or judicial branches of government.

Action evaluated--Effects of the action taken are monitored, analyzed, and reported. If the action is successful, the policy issue is considered resolved. If the policy does not solve the problem or it creates a new problem while solving the one originally addressed, another or new cycle begins.

The process of reconciling diverse and conflicting interests and agreeing on a policy decision is often difficult and time-consuming. Indeed it can take many years for a policy issue to emerge and move through a complete cycle. Compromises of the kind required to reach a policy agreement usually increase the chances that the policy will be found wanting by some interested or affected parties.

Take farm legislation. It is typically given a life of only a few years, and the debating of farm bill modifications rarely ends with passage of an act. For instance, the signing of the 1985 Food Security Act launched a new debate on alternative approaches, such as mandatory supply controls. Thus the policy process pauses but seldom really ends. New interests and concerns often emerge to join the debate with each new cycle. As an example, local community concerns may be stirred when, as

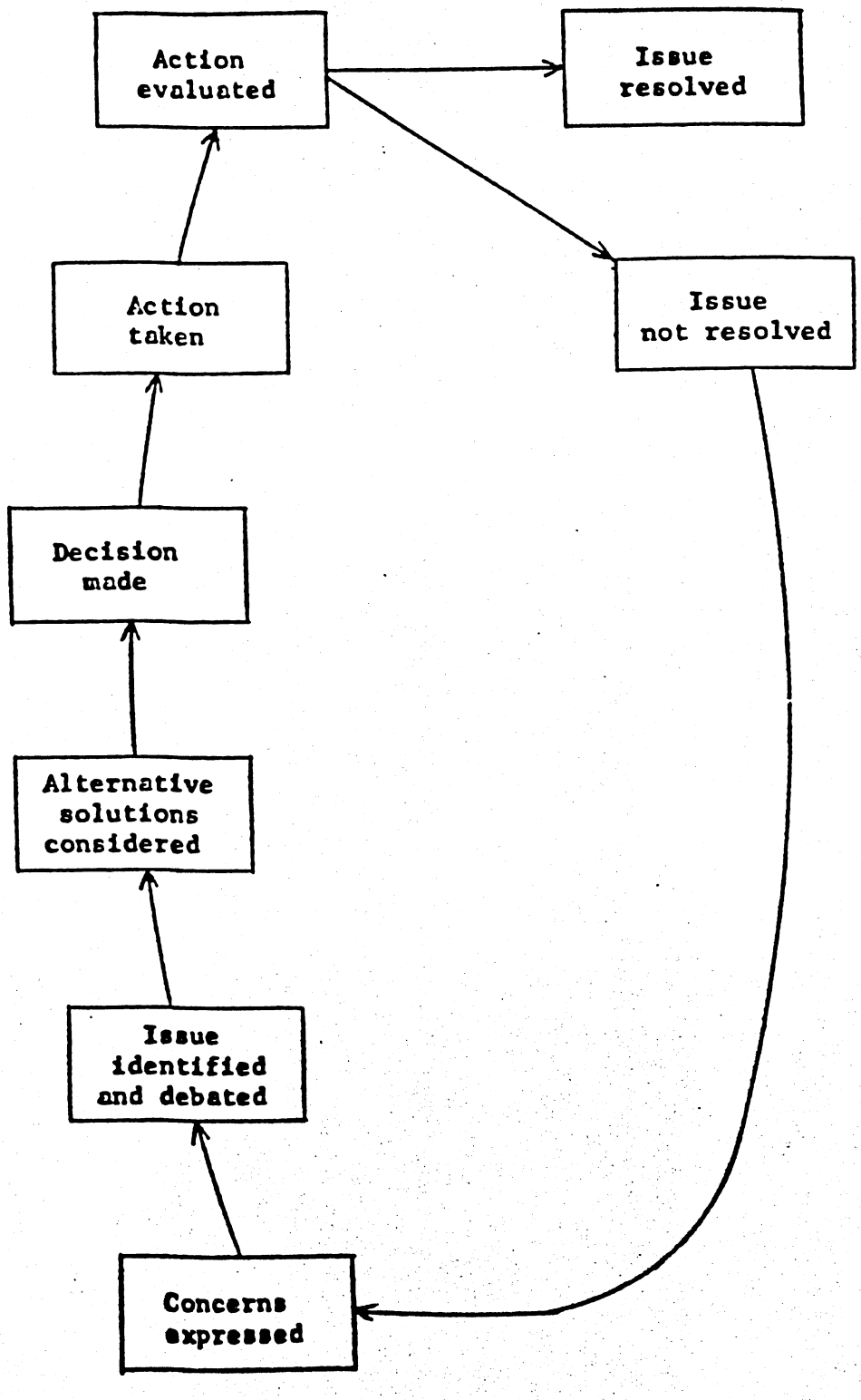

Figure 1. The policy issue cycle

in the last farm bill, conservation reserve and other land idling policies are enacted.[1]

Despite the conflicts and delays that invariably accompany the making of public policy, there are means of expediting the journey through the policy cycle. Political scientist Daniel Ogden writes, "In the United States, public policy is made within a system of semi-autonomous power clusters. Each cluster deals with one broad, interrelated subject area, like Agriculture.... Each cluster operates quite independently of all other clusters to identify policy issues, shape policy alternatives, propose new legislation, and implement policy" (p. 34). Each power cluster includes administrative agencies (government departments, bureaus, services, and commissions), legislative committees, interest groups, professionals (including policy research and extension economists), volunteers, an attentive public, and a latent public.

Ogden defines the attentive public as citizens who "...pay special attention to one area of public policy. Usually it is the area in which they make a living and hope to advance both economically and socially. Thus, farmers pay attention to agricultural policy and hikers, hunters, and fishermen pay attention to public land management policies..." (p. 38).

Ogden describes the latent public as people "...who have interests which are affected by the power cluster but who do not normally pay much attention to the cluster for they do not perceive that its policies will change to affect them adversely. They normally identify with another power cluster and focus their attention on its affairs. So long as the policy upon which they depend continues consistently, they are content not to interfere in the affairs of the other cluster and do not expect to be consulted about changes. However, a major switch in policy which effects this latent public may stimulate them to interfere in the cluster's internal decision-making to protect their own interests." Consumers often fit this description, protesting only when farm policies threaten to boost food prices dramatically or to ignore food safety and quality. And the general public is typically a latent public when it comes to issues like world hunger.

Membership in the Agriculture power cluster has expanded dramatically in recent decades--which can either slow or speed up the process of resolving conflicts. Don Paarlberg drew our attention to this development during the 70's when he wrote and spoke of the changing "farm policy agenda committee" and the issues added to the agenda by new members

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[1]The food and agricultural policy issue cycle which began in 1981 and led to passage of the Food Security Act of 1985 is especially well documented. See Spitze (August 1986 and a 1987 article for Agricultural Economics) and papers by Penn, Browne, Barrows, Flinchbaugh, and Behm in the 1986 issue of the proceedings of the National Public Policy Education Conference, titled Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies.

(pp. 95-96). He cited, in particular, food price issues placed on the agenda by consumers; USDA food programs, an issue placed on the agenda by what had become known as the hunger lobby; and ecological questions, added to the agenda by environmentalists; as well as land use issues, civil rights, and collective bargaining for hired farm labor.

While the complexion of many of these issues has changed since the 70's, certainly the membership in the Agriculture power cluster has continued to broaden. Consider the 1985 Food Security Act. Resource conservation provisions of the Act--the conservation reserve, sodbuster, swampbuster, and conservation cross compliance provisions--were the product of a remarkable coalition of old and new power cluster members representing food, farm, rural community, resource conservation, and environmental interests.

What Do Economists Do?

Economists play different roles in the public policy process. Many serve as policy analysts and advisers. They work for private firms and organizations, as well as for government bureaus and agencies. Some are self-employed consultants. However, the economists for whom this workshop is mainly intended are those doing public supported policy education and research, primarily in land grant universities.

Whatever their titles and affiliations, economists involved in the public policy process have much in common. All practice economics and all are professionals who presumably meet the same basic standards of professionalism. While their roles may differ with respect to purpose, mode, and clientele, they all seem to share the task of helping participants in the policy process make better decisions (Quade, p. 13). The main difference between the roles of land grant university economists and other economists in the policy process is that the former serve a broader public.

As this workshop is concerned with the roles of land grant economists in the policy process, let's now consider how those roles are shaped 1) by the purpose, principles, and practice of policy extension education, 2) by the interface of policy extension and research, and 3) by the economist's tool kit.

Policy Extension Education--Purpose, Principles, and Practice

The rationale for policy extension stems from three fundamental beliefs: The land grant system, along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (which Abraham Lincoln labelled "the People's Department"), has a unique responsibility to serve the general public; an effective democracy depends on an informed electorate; and so the role of public policy extension education is to provide the general public with the knowledge, facts, and information they need to be informed participants in the policy process. Or, as California extension economist Bill Wood puts it, "The outcome of public policy education must be effective democracy at work" (p. 184).

Public policy education is a relative newcomer to extension's program menu (Bottum, p. 185). Conceived during the Depression of the 30's, it reflected a growing awareness that farmers, individually and collectively, could not fully shape their own destinies. The need for government intervention and enlightened public policies was deemed inescapable. Agricultural economists were especially instrumental in raising awareness of the need and support for policy education to help ensure wise decisions. In fact, from its inception, policy extension has been the particular domain of agricultural economists. Even though the policy issues addressed have gone well beyond the farm income problems of the 30's, and for that matter beyond economics, only within the last two decades have we seen a significant broadening of the community of public policy extension workers from economic specialists to other social science disciplines (Flinchbaugh, 1977).

Land grant and policy extension leaders have developed an impressive set of principles to guide their educational programs.[2] These principles grew out of a commitment to the purpose of public policy education and a professional comraderie fostered by dedicated individuals and institutions. The Farm Foundation, for example, has sponsored a National Public Policy Education Conference in each of the last 36 years, bringing together policy extension leaders and specialists from every region to swap educational experiences and to sharpen their teaching skills.

Major questions addressed by the principles for policy extension are, What is the most effective educational approach? Who are the students? What policy issues should extension address? When should policy educators teach?

What is the best educational approach? The guiding principle is clear: The purpose of helping the public be informed participants in the policy process will not be well-served if the educator becomes an advocate for one group or policy position. Public policy educators must strive to be as objective and unbiased as possible. The teaching "model" which extension educators generally believe fits this principle the best is the so-called alternatives-consequences model in which a manageable number of policy alternatives is singled out for discussion, including an assessment of their consequences for different individuals and groups. The alternatives are those identified by participants in the public policy process, including extension educators themselves.

Commodity program alternatives identified in past policy extension programs have typically included some version of price and income supports, production controls, and a market-oriented policy, with different bells and whistles for specific commodities. Consequences of the alternatives

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[2]See especially a new report edited by Roy Carriker with papers by Barrows, Spitze, Marshall, and Ogden, as well as articles on policy education methodology and experiences in the annual reports, Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies, published by the Farm Foundation, Oak Brook, Illinois.

considered in the policy process include the effectiveness of the policy in achieving its goals and its expected impacts on different people and interests--farmers, input suppliers, consumers, taxpayers, and so on.

Policy extension educators know that the alternatives-consequences model helps to ensure but never guarantees objectivity. Extension can depart from objectivity in innocent and trivial ways--through the choice of policy issues addressed, the kinds and order of policy alternatives identified, and the possible consequences discussed in the educational program. The uneven availability of research-based knowledge and facts may contribute to the perception that extension educators are biased. For example, agricultural economists have probably produced more information and facts about the impacts of food and agricultural policies on farmers than on consumers and other affected persons, on the grounds that the impacts on these other groups are widely dispersed. Nevertheless, the unevenness can carry through to the policy extension program unless the policy educator fills the void, making sure that all affected parties and consequences are considered.

Harold Breimyer, for one, has written of more serious threats to objectivity (p. 4): "The most obvious challenge to the integrity of the University and its scholars is private funding of research, either institutionally or as private consulting. These are alike in that both compromise the basic role of the Land Grant University. That role is to spread knowledge, to make it a public good." But the more general threat to integrity, Breimyer goes on, "...is not that which is bought but that which is subtly induced. Some research and extension economists attach themselves to an interest group so tightly as almost to be indentured."

He has a point. The extension worker in daily contact with farmers, homemakers, or local leaders, not only identifies with their problems but, anxious to continue serving them, may adopt their positions without realizing it. As USDA's Extension Administrator in 1977-79, I found myself often in the middle of claims and counter claims regarding extension objectivity. Department officials and nonfarm interest groups complained that extension agents were "indentured" to farmers as well as to agribusiness firms which helped to finance agent training. Newspaper clippings routed to me told of extension staff, concerned about possible adverse effects of USDA actions on farmers, publicly misrepresenting facts and speaking out in opposition to Departmental support of measures to protect food safety and to ban 2,4,5-T or other pesticides believed to cause cancer.

So, like it or not, extension--especially policy extension--is an actor in the <u>political</u> arena. It is never politically neutral (Barrows, p. 16). Merely addressing an important issue in a policy extension program increases public awareness of the issue, the policy alternatives, and their consequences, and thereby potentially alters the balance of power.

Complete objectivity is impossible. As Breimyer puts it, "Personal capacity for detached objectivity is an uncommon endowment, while inducements to compromise are many" (p. 6). But of course those

inducements to compromise must be resisted if the mission of the land grant system is to be fulfilled.

Who are the students? The ideal of an informed electorate and the goal of providing useful knowledge and information to that electorate implies a large, diverse student body. As a minimum, we think of it as including the individuals and organizations most directly interested in or affected by the policy issues addressed--Ogden's attentive public. And we certainly do not exclude the "latent" public.

One challenge is to resist pressure to limit the audience. It is easier, and results come faster, if programs are designed for and targeted to the more highly motivated, knowledgeable audiences. Pressure to do so builds as the performance of extension educators is judged more and more by evidence of immediate, observable results.

Moreover, policy specialists have made important contributions through educational programs for Congressional staff and other direct participants in the policy process. Often under the label of leadership development, extension has given agricultural and rural leaders who influence policy--and who teach others--far greater knowledge and understanding of policy issues, alternatives, and consequences than would have been possible through a program for a broader audience.

Policy extension education and leadership development are not either-or's. But at some point, the commitment of the land grant system to the ideal of an informed electorate could be impaired unknowingly if the balance shifts too far toward serving special audiences. Not only would that give undue advantage to some participants in the process, it would raise the troublesome question, who in fact decides whom extension should serve?

What policy issues should be addressed? The public decides, not extension educators or others in the university. Often, of course, different people will perceive an issue differently. It is up to the extension educator to help them understand when and if the issue in their eyes is part of a larger or another problem. Even when it is, the smaller issue may be the one to address if it is the source of major public concern or is simply more manageable.

When to teach? The guiding concept is the "teachable moment." Simply stated, you can address a policy issue too early (adequate interest and concerns have not surfaced) or too late (emotions are too high or positions have already been taken). The teachable moment also applies to each stage of the policy issue cycle (Figure 1). That is, you can be too early or too late preparing material and conducting programs to fit each stage of the cycle.

The Interface Between Policy Extension and Research

The two-way relationship between research and extension under the same land grant college roof is unique among public supported institutions worldwide. In theory it works this way: Research produces knowledge

and facts which extension adapts, interprets, and conveys to the public through educational programs. Extension identifies knowledge gaps or information needed for effective educational programs, which researchers seek to close.

As Bob Spitze explains, "The organization at each educational institution can effect the productivity of this relationship. When the same person is both the researcher and the policy educator, the integration is easy. However, when they involve separate professionals or when the programs are administered separately, there is often difficulty in achieving this integration" (August 1987, p. 24).

Natural differences between research and extension preclude perfect integration of the two functions. Different policy researchers typically contribute very different kinds of data and analyses at different stages of the policy issue cycle, and much of it may never be thought of or labelled as policy research. I include the monitoring of trends and analysis of relationships which may, perhaps only by chance, describe, clarify, or quantify public problems, thereby supporting or dispelling reasons for public concern. For example, in past years, agricultural economics research carried out quite separately from policy education programs clarified, if not dispelled, concerns that independent owner/operator farms were vanishing with the spread of corporate agriculture and foreign ownership of farmland. Results of independent research may also identify potential policy problems.

Analyses of policy alternatives and consequences and evaluations of current policies and programs, probably come closest to what most of us think of as policy research. Here too, the research is not necessarily done as in integral part of a policy research and education program.

Still, a solid partnership between extension and research is essential. In my view, extension should have a strong voice in guiding policy research. Researchers probably listen too little to extension when deciding what to research, and extension educators are probably too timid when it comes to telling researchers what they need. An unfortunate pecking order persists. Research is still seen by many researchers, and administrators who came up through research, as somehow higher on the ladder of professionalism than extension. The irony, of course, is that if achievement in the agricultural sciences is held in higher esteem than public service, the uniqueness of the land grant system and its claim to public support will probably erode.

The Economist's Tool Kit

So far, what I have said about policy extension and the interface between policy extension and research could apply to any discipline or to any land grant professional involved in the policy process, not just economists. To answer the question, what can the economist do and not do in the policy process, I must acknowledge the role and use of the economist's tool kit. A review of the history of economic thought would be needed to describe adequately the pertinent economic concepts,

knowledge, theories, and techniques. Here I can only point to some highlights and trends.

Classical and neoclassical economics have provided the economist with powerful concepts of human behavior, but they also suffer from important limitations for policy work. Despite the relevance of focusing on issues of choice and decisionmaking, classical and neoclassical economics have had application mainly to individual decisions rather than public decisions and actions. The central importance of markets and the accompanying emphasis on monetary values and economic efficiency in production and distribution are further limitations. So too is the historical emphasis of economics on value-free, positive knowledge and the perception that human values could not be identified and analyzed objectively by economists, and therefore were beyond the domain of economics.

Through time, the economist's tool kit has been amended and refined. Improvements in the relevance of economics have often come at a faster pace in periods of criticism, such as the 1960's when economics, science in general, and our academic institutions were taken to task for failing to solve major problems of society. Agricultural economists, with their applied orientation, have been instrumental in forging more practical economic concepts and tools.

Major additions and refinements relevant to policy research and education have come with developments such as welfare economics, institutional economics, and more recently public choice theory (Spitze, August 1986, pp. 5-8). Welfare economics, though still suffering from restrictive assumptions and other practical limitations, at least has helped to increase the economist's awareness of the importance and the feasibility of objective normative knowledge (knowledge about values) as a companion to positive knowledge of existing facts and relationships. Glenn Johnson, Michigan State University, speaks of positive and normative knowledge as the essential ingredients of prescriptive knowledge, which of course has direct value to problem-solving, both private and public.

The stretching of economic thought over the years has also brought a recognition that economics can and should deal with both monetary and nonmonetary values, that its concepts and tools need not be limited to that which can be measured in dollars and cents. Equally important for public policy application has been the economist's understanding and handling of issues of resource ownership and income distribution, as causes of public problems and as effects of different policy alternatives. Indeed, the analysis and compromising involved in making policy decisions typically must deal with the question, who benefits and who pays?

Developments in institutional economics and, more recently, public choice theory have also responded directly and indirectly to the limited applicability of classical and neoclassical economics to public problems and decisionmaking. Clearly, the policy arena involves a variety of institutions and institutional processes in addition to markets. The public choice school of thought typifies the modern extension and reshaping of that thought. As described by Spitze, "It recognizes the

limitations of the classical heritage emphasizing the individual participant, the economic maximizing motivation, and the private market determination of economic value as it focuses instead on a society of groupism, multi-goal seeking human beings, and expanding governmental spheres. In its efforts to conceptually link economic and political motivations and decisions, it deals with 'power maximizing' along with 'individual decision making'... Public choice theorists study political processes as just as logical an expression of the economic striving of rational individuals for achieving maximum utility as a study of the processes of the marketplace" (August 1986, p. 7).

A few closing points are implied by this brief discussion of the tool kit:

- Effective policy extension and research call for a problem-solving orientation as well as a disciplinary base. They require prescriptive, normative, and positive knowledge. The problem-solving orientation is always potentially restrained by limitations of the economist's tool kit. But many of those limitations have been reduced through time, giving economists increasingly useful concepts, knowledge, and techniques for policy work.

- Extension economists are comfortable with the problem-solving orientation. Some research economists are not. Sometimes, research and extension economists simply march to different drummers. For instance, the principle of objectivity, to extension economists, usually means providing objective, unbiased knowledge and educational assistance to the public. Researchers view objectivity with equal reverence. But they also desire to be identified with science and recognized as scientists, in which case objectivity tends to mean value-free, rigorous inquiry. Although the standards of excellence in agricultural science and public service should be complementary, in truth they may appear to be at odds. In the extreme, this could weaken the partnership between policy extension and research.

- I should qualify the last point. If research economists, seeking recognition from their discipline, err by becoming enamored with scientific sophistication and mathematics, extension economists may also err by neglecting, if not abandoning economics as they seek acceptance from their audiences. The pressures to do so are routine. Policy extension economists are called upon to be more than economists. Their audiences need and want educational, problem-solving assistance, not assistance from specific disciplines.

- As the economist's tool kit expands and becomes more useful for policy application, economists could forget the importance of a basic understanding of economics on the part of participants in the policy process. At times, the most critical (or only) need of participants is for a better understanding of things like demand and supply, economic efficiency, benefits and costs, and marginality, or a simple clarification of economic myths. By

incorrectly assuming a high level of economic literacy among participants, economists could fail to give those people the foundation they must have to become informed participants.

Closing Thoughts

My crystal ball shows a steady rise in the need and opportunities for public policy education and research. Growing interdependencies between people and nations and closer links between food, agricultural, resource, environmental, and rural community issues, all point to more public issues and spillover effects of the kind that spawn public policies. It is simply harder now for people everywhere to be masters of their own destinies without affecting others directly or indirectly. But as policy issues grow in number and complexity, it is also harder for people to maintain their interest and ability to be informed participants in the policy process (Elgin and Bushnell).

My crystal ball shows land grant policy research and extension economists making an impressive contribution to the need for public knowledge and understanding, provided they strive to maintain objectivity, continue to teach a broad public, ensure a strong extension-research partnership, and make wise use of the economist's expanding tool kit.

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