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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
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JUL 31 1986  
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Priorities for Research and Education Programs  
in Agricultural Marketing: Rationale and Historical Perspective\*

by

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There probably is no other profession or scientific discipline that over the years has devoted as much time to critical self-evaluation and collective efforts to prioritize research topics as has the agricultural economics profession. For the past 25 or 30 years, nearly every meeting of the AAEA and related associations has included addresses and sessions which have expounded upon our alleged neglect of important areas, the ineffectiveness and poor quality of research and the need to improve the ways in which we have organized to do research.<sup>1</sup>

An outsider reading the proceedings of such meetings might reasonably conclude that we have a problem; we seem to be in a continuous, or at least a periodic state of uncertainty as to what we should be working on. And, if one can believe the critical comment, we have often worked on trivial matters while neglecting the important issues of the day.

Examination of the proceedings issues of other associations such as the American Economic Associations or the American Finance Association reveals very little in the way of such discourses. We might ask then, what is there about agricultural economics that seems to require repeated group evaluations of research directions in this field?

The answer to this question lies, for the most part, in the fact that support for such research has been mandated by Congress. However, the

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\*Paper presented at a Symposium on Priorities for Research and Education Programs in Agricultural Marketing, AAEA Annual Meeting, Reno, Nevada, July 29, 1986.

<sup>1</sup>For evidence see French (1974), Farris (1983), and Swanson (1984).

1986

Marketing of farm products

authorizing legislation does not specify which issues are most pressing and which types of research promise most in social benefits. The collective advice of the profession on these matters has a significant influence on the level of funding and the allocation of funds among specific research areas.

How often such exercises need to be repeated is another matter. Having participated in a great many of these sessions, I am filled with a strong feeling of deja vu. However, although many research issues have not changed much over time, there may be occasional need to consider shifts in emphasis and to remind public administrators of such needs. Further, graduate students and new professionals may obtain some useful guidance from updated efforts to identify issues that are important and researchable.

Public support for agricultural marketing research has developed through a number of Congressional Acts. However, it was the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 that primarily set out the goals of such research and made their achievement official public policy. It authorized and directed the Secretary of Agriculture to support a range of research activities mostly concerned with making the marketing system more efficient.

The 1946 Act thrust the agricultural economics profession into new research areas where previous experience was very limited. This led to a series of National Marketing Workshops during the period of the 1950's. The issues and areas of marketing research identified in these workshops provided the foundation for much of what has occurred in later years.

During the decade of the 1960's the research agenda formulated in the 1950's was further refined. Among the more notable developments were (1) the activities associated with Jim Shaffer's landmark working paper on publicly supported research in agricultural marketing, (2) the delineation of Research Problem Areas (RPA's) for marketing economics by a joint USDA-SAES task force,

and (3) the studies prepared under the auspices of a National Commission on Food Marketing.

Shaffer's paper focused on systemwide or subsector problems and what he called the scientific industrialization of agriculture. He questioned some aspects of emphasis on individual firm research. His thought-provoking paper remains useful reading today. The USDA-SAES task force report identified basic objectives and principles of marketing research and provided the framework under which most federally supported marketing research is now reported. The National Commission on Food Marketing was the first broad systematic effort to evaluate the structure and performance of food markets. These studies played a major role in redirecting later research. However, with the exception of the more limited research under the NC117 Project, there has been no updating of these studies and no repetition of the 1966 Commission.

In the decade of the 1970's, emphasis shifted from defining programs to assessment and evaluation of past marketing research. Highlights included (1) an evaluative paper by Willard F. Mueller on the lessons learned from the 1960's, including the National Commission on Food Marketing, (2) CSRS-sponsored studies of marketing research in the agricultural experiment stations by Metzger (1973) and Babb (1977) and (3) AAEA-sponsored literature reviews on marketing efficiency (French, 1977), price analysis and related areas (Tomek and Robinson, 1977) and market organization and performance (Helmberger, Campbell and Dobson, 1981).

A CSRS-sponsored book on frontiers in agricultural marketing research, edited by Paul Farris, was begun in the late 1970's, but not finally published until 1983. Although this book is comprehensive in its review and identification of marketing research issues, it does not have a summary

chapter that integrates and summarizes the major findings and conclusions. The absence of such a summary may well have been a factor in the decision of the Experiment Station Committee on Policy to commission the paper which serves as the foundation for this session.

My historical review suggests that most of the issues considered important today were identified in the 1950's and most issues considered important in the 1950's are still important today. However, the emphasis has shifted a bit over time from a focus on firm costs and efficiency in the 1950's to broader interregional trade studies of the 1960's, to more system- and policy-oriented studies in the 1970's and finally in the 1980's to greater concern about general economic efficiency and welfare. The latter emphasis is reflected in the October 1985 conference sponsored by the Farm Foundation and others on Economic Efficiency in Agricultural and Food Marketing. It has become increasingly difficult to separate marketing research from more general studies of the total agricultural system.

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