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DISCUSSION: ROLE OF THE SOUTHERN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS ASSOCIATION IN EXTENSION

Harold M. Harris, Jr.

As he usually does, Knutson has caused us to think. Admittedly, he did not get around to the assigned topic until the last 15 percent of his paper. Yet, he has raised some issues that in the long run override this topic. For if we have no Extension Service in the future, we will not have to worry about SAEA's role in extension. It is my hope that this paper can be presented to the Southern Directors, and that they will consider carefully what Ron has to say. I agree with most of his key points.

To summarize briefly, Knutson has identified several forces affecting agriculture that demand research and extension focus. These are internationalization, technology, industrialization, and resource mix. He then presented two major challenges resulting from these forces to the Land-Grant System, and several challenges for extension, generally, and for agricultural economists, specifically. These challenges included keeping up, adjusting to changing clientele and structure, and evaluating the impact of new technology.

I have only three comments about this part of Knutson's paper, which constitutes most of its bulk and most of its quality. It should be noted that views on these issues are prejudiced by personal observations.

First, even though I have privately leveled many of the same criticisms at extension, particularly at the county level, I am not sure that we should completely give up on the System and let it "break down" the way Knutson describes it; that is, *off-campus specialists, county emphasis on youth and program organization, and farmers going directly to the university for answers.*

In South Carolina, we have personal computers in every county office. In perhaps one-fourth of these counties, agents have developed genuine proficiency in computer use. They can and frequently do take software programs developed by specialists and use

them to advise farmers on key production, financing, and marketing decisions. This group overlaps quite closely with that group of agents who still maintain "industrialized farmers" among their clientele. Of course, they often rely on specialist help. About half of these agents have acquired computer skills sufficient to develop their own computer programs using a generalized commercial software package, such as a spreadsheet.

This demonstrates that extension *can* regain its ability to serve commercial agriculture through field staff if it is willing to hire and train the "right" people, and continuously update them. Note that the term field staff rather than county agent was used, because changes in organization and increased specialization are needed in most instances. And while I agree with Knutson on his point that resources are being misallocated between the local versus specialist level—the price of direct university-farmer assistance is high. The effectiveness of both research and extension programs will suffer if a qualified field staff is not in place to buffer both researchers and extension specialists from brush fires brought on by the demands of large, often politically influential, farmers.

The second point relates to Knutson's statements about the family farm. Like him, I will not quibble about definitions. But first, he says the institution is dying. Later, he says we should help it survive. It is my belief that this institution will hang on with greater tenacity than many give it credit, and I agree with Knutson that this should be the focus of a major program thrust.

Third, Knutson addressed the forces changing U.S. agriculture and the implications for universities and economists solely from the perspective of an agriculturist. There are critical implications of these forces on the availability of natural resources, the environment,

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and the health of rural communities as well. I am sure a number of people in the audience wish that he had taken a broader view.

ROLE OF THE SAEA

Turning now to the assigned topic, what is the appropriate role of our Association in extension and how well is it meeting that role? Havlicek last year reviewed the stated purposes and objectives from the Association's Constitution. They are: *to foster the study and understanding of agricultural economics and its implications to problems in the Southern United States; promote unity and effectiveness of effort among all concerned with those problems; promote improvement in the professional competence and standards of members; cooperate with other organizations and institutions engaged in similar or related activities, and increase the contribution of agricultural economics to human welfare.*

Certainly then, as Knutson states, this includes all professional agricultural economists whether in teaching, research, or extension. But, he did not point out that the two main tools the Association has used and should continue to use in meeting the needs of agricultural economists are the *Southern Journal of Agricultural Economics (SJAE)* and the Association's annual meeting.

I must confess that I am completely schizoid on the subject of how the Association should meet the needs of extension specialists through these two avenues. On the one hand, as an extension economist I seek no favors or special treatment. In fact, I am repelled by them. It is the responsibility of the individual professional, no matter what his job, to keep current and in touch. Membership and active participation in the affairs of this and other professional associations is one means of doing that. Outmoded organizational structures, leadership problems, and poorly designed reward systems play a role here as Knutson points out. We have found that joint appointments for extension people, even 10 percent research, can be beneficial. But, career advancement still boils down to an individual responsibility.

The other side of this issue is the responsibility of the Association. It is to maintain its focus on timely topics and problems of an applied nature with emphasis on regional

issues. If the *SJAE* is accessible to the extension economist as an author and is relevant to his work as a reader, the Association has done its job. If the extension economist is given the opportunity to present papers and participate in symposia at the annual meeting and if the papers and interactions are relevant to his or her job, once again the Association has met its continuing obligation.

To put it bluntly, I have little sympathy for some of my extension colleagues who criticize this Association. The blame often lies with the critic, not the Association. Further, I am appalled by the preoccupation of some with the "extension process." Process is important just as research methodology is important—as a means to solving a problem, not as an end by itself.

But having said this, let me turn to the darker side of my schizoid mind by relating a few incidents that have disturbed me. Some years ago, I was invited to give a paper before this group on extension outlook programs. One of the key arguments raised in the paper was that such programs had inadequate research backup. Some of you may recall the "lost horse" method of price projection that is still in vogue today. The AAEA has even systematized the process in its popular outlook session referred to by Knutson. That paper was rejected for publication in *SJAE*. In the words of one reviewer, the paper made no research contribution. I will always remember the late John Nixon with respect; because, as Editor of *SJAE*, he sent the paper to three new reviewers. The paper was ultimately accepted (Harris), but the excellent discussion by John Holt, of the University of Florida, was lost in the process.

Several years back, we had two excellent candidates for president of SAEA, one of whom was an extension economist. He did not win, which by itself is no problem. But after the announcement of the vote, I overheard the following smug remark from a widely respected researcher: "*That just goes to prove that an extension man will never be elected president of this Association.*" And, indeed none ever has in our nearly 20 years of existence.

On another occasion, a past president of this Association proudly showed me a list of some 20 or 30 names. My recollection is that it was a list of invited speakers plus session chairpersons for the annual meeting that year. "Look," he modestly proclaimed, "*this is the perfect list. I've got every Southern State*

represented, key department heads, USDA, women, and blacks." The list contained no extension names. To his credit, the list was augmented, but the initial oversight still hurt. So while it is the extension economist's own responsibility to avail himself of what the Association has to offer, either I am paranoid or some subtle problems may still exist.

By pointing out some recent activities sponsored by the American Agricultural Economics Association, Knutson suggests that we should follow the lead of the AAEA. Nonsense! Let us not copy the AAEA on anything. Indeed, I am confident that Knutson did not mean what he may have implied. It is not that such activities as refresher courses, short courses, workshops for congressional aides, might not be valuable adjuncts to our Association's activities. But I repeat, the two main thrusts of this Association should continue to be the *Journal* and the annual meeting.

It is in these two areas, but particularly the former, that the AAEA has failed. Extension economists under the leadership of people like John Ikerd, of the University of Georgia, have repeatedly approached the American Association with pleas for relevancy and a refocus on applied problems. We have gained an annual luncheon, some workshops, and soon, a magazine. These are good, but we still have the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics (AJAE)*. Forty percent of the articles in the August 1984 issue of *AJAE* were apparently written by people from outside the Land-Grant System. Only a few have any extension application.

Professional journals, and particularly the *AJAE*, guide research. There are grounds for concern about where this guidance has taken our profession. As an example, even though Schuh laid out the framework in his 1976

address, nobody predicted the worst financial crisis to strike U.S. agriculture in 50 years. The econometricians wrote articles arguing whether the elasticity of demand for farm products was now elastic, unitary elastic, or still inelastic. The financial management group stroked its MOTAD models and wrote about "financial stress." In hindsight, the current crisis now appears so predictable - the monetary and fiscal policies of the Reagan administration have been a perfect prescription for financial problems in agriculture. But nobody put two and two together until, "we were in it up to our hips." Think of what such a projection would have meant to extension programs over the past 4 years.

Turning again to the assigned task, it is my belief that the *SJAE* is applied and relevant. Several years ago, I was fearful that it was enroute to becoming a junior *AJAE*. Scanning the December 1983 issue, one finds mainly applied articles, written by land-grant economists. Most have extension applications which may have real world impacts, presuming we have the type of intradepartmental communication that Knutson stressed.

As to the annual meeting, February is positively the worst month for most extension economists to attend. To change would raise once again the issue of meeting separately from the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists. Otherwise, having attended most of the annual meetings over the past 15 years, it is my opinion that, in general, they have been well planned, provocative, and sometimes even of immediate practical value to my extension program. Ed Faris, of Clemson University, has observed that good economists tend to hang out together, both professionally and socially. I like to think the SAEA meeting is one of the places they hang out.

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