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EXTENSION WORK AS RELATED TO REGIONAL PLANNING

by

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In a small group conference attended by the writer a short time ago, a remark was made by one man concerning another not present. The remark was, "He has an extension point of view". The statement itself and the way it was said caused this person to be questioned by others in the group as to just what he had meant. "Oh!" he said, "the man I had in mind is always wanting to know - what about it? What good does it do to know it? Who can use it? How can you get it across to the man who needs to know, - all of which is a bit disconcerting to me when I am trying to concentrate for no other reason than to learn something new."

This little incident caused the writer to wonder if the research and extension workers in the field of agricultural economics were characterized by this evident difference of opinion as to the results that were apparently desired from their efforts. A consideration of a number of state organizations resulted in the conclusion that it was not in general true. There were instances to the contrary, but generally speaking, most of the research conducted in agricultural economics has been directed toward an accumulation and analysis of the facts bearing on some problem confronting the farmers of the locality. This approach is fundamental and of vital importance, not only to extension workers, who are helpless without practical research, but to research workers whose products become useless if not pertinent.

A continuity of effort in the field of agricultural economics is something to be encouraged, not that it is unique, for it exists in many other branches of agriculture, but because it is effective. Undoubtedly, the position of agricultural economists has been strengthened by the fact that the group is made up of many whose early training has been along a variety of different lines. A number entered the field of agricultural economics from animal husbandry, soils, agronomy, plant breeding, and other agricultural sciences, bringing with them the scientific approach to problems developed in these fields. Some have gone into economic research work after several years of county agent or other extension experience. A large number of our extension specialists were formerly in research and resident teaching, or have had several years of special training through graduate work.

It is hoped that as we develop in the future, we do not lose sight of this coordination which has been fundamental in our development to date. One of the best ways to accomplish this, or to maintain it where it now exists, is to develop our departments with a close "tie-up" between research, resident teaching and extension. As we grow, and whether we do may depend on how we do it, we should be thinking about a proper balance between these three branches, and the effect of each on the result as a whole. It always helps to "keep the feet of a research worker on the ground" if he is permitted to present some of his findings to an audience who are up against everyday problems, just as it helps to "keep the statements of an extension man closer to the facts" if he is given an opportunity to do some research occasionally.

EXTENSION WORK AS RELATED TO REGIONAL PLANNING

The cooperative research project of the State Experiment Stations and the Program Planning Division of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, on which most of you have been working this summer, is a definite step toward furthering coordination in the field of agricultural economics. In achieving the goal that has been set up, extension should contribute, along with the rest, in accordance with the knowledge and experience which it has bearing on the problems.

The big job of coordination, however, lies in the field of agriculture as a whole and not in any one branch. Conditions are changing rapidly. The whole life of the Nation had become adjusted to a generally rising price level from 1896 to 1920. Since 1920 the great changes in prices have been sharply downward. During the earlier period ending in 1920 increased production was generally associated with increased income. During the latter period, production, more or less, has usually been accompanied by serious losses. During the earlier period debts were easily contracted and repaid. During the latter period debts have been virtually impossible of repayment. During the earlier period large investments and fixed costs were carried with comparative ease. During the latter period high fixed costs have usually meant bankruptcy. The effects of these changes on agriculture and all related to agriculture are only now becoming apparent.

But falling prices have only accentuated a change which has been in progress for years, the effects of which were not apparent during the period of rising prices. Agriculture has been constantly changing from a self-sufficient to a commercialized business. Under the earlier conditions, the primary question was "how to produce". Under the latter conditions, "sufficient money income" has become the absolute necessity. As commercialization became more intense, the number of factors affecting money income greatly increased. Under the earlier conditions there were few expenditures, and credit was of minor interest to the farmer. Now, with large expenditures for labor, feed, seed, fertilizer, equipment (including automobiles), and public services, the proper use of credit may mean the difference between ownership and bankruptcy. As more and more of the products of the farm are exchanged for money, questions on what to produce, how much to produce, and how to properly combine the various farm enterprises, become fully as important as "how to produce". The proper organization of the farm changes with every new invention, and with improvements in transportation. More farmers fail from the lack of application of fundamental business principles than because of poor production practices.

In a self-sufficient agriculture, marketing was of little importance. With a rising price level marketing costs were minimized. At present a highly commercialized agriculture caught in the grip of falling prices has found marketing costs a major issue, for these costs have not fallen like commodity prices. The facts show that during the periods of rapidly falling prices an increasing percentage of the consumers' dollar is absorbed in marketing charges, while a decreasing percentage finally reaches the farmer. The facts further show that while efficiency in production has steadily advanced, there has been no such increase evident in the efficiency of distribution. An increasing proportion of our population is

EXTENSION WORK AS RELATED TO REGIONAL PLANNING

occupied with the distribution of products which a comparatively small number actually produce. Marketing has become of dominant importance, for these costs in many instances add more to the costs of farm products than all the costs incurred on the farm.

It was not until the emergency situation created by the collapse of prices in 1929, and the National program for recovery was inaugurated, that a wide-spread awakening as to the effect of the problems of a commercialized agriculture upon income developed. Those conditions have not changed the ultimate goal of American agriculture; namely, a more abundant and satisfying rural life. They have, however, changed the means of obtaining this broad objective, for today the attainment of a more abundant and satisfying rural life largely rests upon a sufficient money income to command the goods and services required for present-day standards of living.

The thought of Congress, when it passed the Cooperative Agricultural Extension Act (Smith-Lever Act) which is the basis of the present agricultural extension system in the United States was that the practice of agriculture in the nation was many years behind the nation's knowledge of agriculture. We do know considerable in the economic field that is not being practiced, but farmers are demanding much which we cannot furnish them, because we do not know. Furthermore, economic conditions change so rapidly that much that we did know may no longer apply. The question might well be asked, "Are we leading the farmer or is he pushing us?" "In the operation of his farm, isn't the progressive farmer spending proportionally more time thinking about these business management problems than we are in the development of our agricultural research and extension work to assist him?" "Are we in a position to give him the economic information needed to make many of the decisions which are required in the successful operation of a farm?" It is just as essential that our Colleges of Agriculture adjust personnel, courses of training, and emphasis on the various factors related to agricultural welfare as it is for the farmer to adjust his practices to meet changing conditions.

The farmer must plan and make decisions for his farm as a whole. It is the intelligent use of all of the factors which he has at his command that tends to make a favorable money income. The Extension program which most accurately aids him in making current decisions serves him best. A co-ordination of the resources of the Extension Service upon the basis of improved farm income will do much to meet the needs of farmers working under present-day conditions.

The need for coordination of information on the part of all Extension specialists is obvious when we consider a few of the problems. If a farmer should ask for help in choosing the best breed of dairy cow, a correct decision on an income basis would require many facts from the farm itself and also a knowledge of the market. If the market is for fluid milk, then no income decision can be made without a knowledge of the butterfat base and the butterfat differentials. The specialist who does not coordinate this local information cannot help the farmer make an accurate decision on an income basis.

EXTENSION WORK AS RELATED TO REGIONAL PLANNING

Valuable assistance to the farmer in regard to raising or purchasing his dairy herd replacements requires not only a knowledge of breeding and feeding but a knowledge of what the trend in the county has been in the matter of obtaining replacements and the reasons for the trend.

A correct income decision as to whether or not a farmer should add additional enterprises does not depend so much on the fact that greater diversity would be accomplished or that more products would be raised for home use, as it does on the effect such a change will have on the costs and income of other enterprises and, finally, on the total net farm income. A concentration on the problem of assisting farmers to obtain a larger income will require new emphasis on coordinating the many values which the Extension Service can offer.

There has probably been no project developed recently which attempts to bring together, and focus the attention of the economist, the agronomist, the livestock man, the forester, and the entomologist, on one problem any better than this regional adjustment project. Early in the procedure most states formed committees composed of these various individuals, and each person has found that he had much to offer which might have been rather ineffective, except as a part of a well organized program. The determination of the adjustments needed in any area requires the combined efforts of all working toward a single objective - namely an increased farm income.

In view of this present cooperative project, it is of interest to read a statement from the book of C.B. Smith and M.C. Wilson on "The Agricultural Extension System for the United States" written in 1929.

"Extension program making has gone through an evolutionary process in the United States and is marked by three rather distinct phases of development:

(1) The phase when the government or its extension agent assumed to know what was needed on the individual farm and in the community and the Extension program came primarily from government or the agent.

(2) The phase when the farming people themselves, in council with the Extension agent, were made to feel largely responsible for the work and the Extension program became what was called a "self-determined" program and was largely based on local information and conditions.

(3) The phase when agents of government and the people concerned together made the analysis of conditions, together selected the outstanding needs, and together made a program to meet these needs. In this period the knowledge of the economist, the statistician, the Extension specialist, the business man, and the farmer is pooled in the making of a state-wide, country-wide, or community-wide extension program that shall fit into national and world needs."

EXTENSION WORK AS RELATED TO REGIONAL PLANNING

While it may seem to some that we have reverted back to phase one as a practical means for handling an emergency, it would seem to the writer that we are now entering more strongly than ever on phase three, strengthened by the creation of federal assistance necessary to bring about many of the needed adjustments. A higher degree of coordination is required than formerly between research and extension, between farmer and specialist, between locality and nation, if maximum results are to be forthcoming. Until the leading farmers realize the need for certain adjustments in their county and understand the effect which these adjustments will have on their farm incomes, it will be difficult to bring them about in any constructive manner. However, knowing that certain adjustments should be made and having no effective way of helping a farmer make them seems like a rather futile procedure. For example, if the farmers of a certain community recognize that their farms are only about half the size that they should be for the type of farming adapted to the region, and their farms are not paying as a result of this, what can they do about it? At least a recognition of the problem by all concerned should speed up the adjustments, and cause less hardship on the individuals affected.

It is obvious that the Extension Service does have a definite function in regional planning. I would like to briefly enlarge on two contributions which can be made by one group of the Extension Service, namely the Extension Economist.

The general lack of understanding by farmers of the fundamental principles involved in the building of an economically sound agricultural structure as compared to their knowledge of the most efficient production practices, makes it essential that major consideration be given to educating farmers concerning these principles and their application to the individual farm organization.

The greatest need today is an impartial presentation of the basic facts, to place those contacted in a better position to evaluate correctly and apply to specific problems the economic information now available. The job is more than that of explaining a plan or program that has been developed. We must take the time and effort to bring rural leaders to the point in economic reasoning that they have reached in other fields of agriculture. It is necessary that we go back of the results, for they may have been caused by a number of economic forces working at the same time. Quite often the most obvious cause may be the least important, and might actually be a factor, which, if working independently, would bring about an opposite result.

In a course given in Poultry Husbandry only a few years ago, the students were taught that it was necessary for baby chicks to have contact with the ground to prevent "leg weakness". This advice developed from the fact that chickens raised with access to outdoor yards did not develop "leg weakness" while those kept inside did. Later, through scientific investigation, it became apparent that it was the rays of the sun obtained when in these yards that prevented the occurrence of the disease. This fact has brought about many changes in practices.

EXTENSION WORK AS RELATED TO REGIONAL PLANNING

It is generally accepted by many people that the abandonment of farms in the East is due to "worn-out soils". The facts reveal that these farms never did have high yields, and that the yields at present are just as high as formerly. The abandonment is not due to a change in the farm or its operator, but to economic conditions outside the farm over which the farmer has no control, and which now make the operation of these farms unprofitable. This makes the remedy quite different.

The use of the "check plot" is indispensable in agricultural research. If the changes taking place in the growth of a plant on the check plot do not differ greatly from the growth taking place in the experiment, the conclusion is that the factors applied had little effect, or that something else was so much more important that the effect was not apparent. If the price of an individual commodity changes, but this change is about the same as that which occurred in most other commodities, it should be equally obvious that the primary cause is not something peculiar to that commodity.

A comparison of the changes in the price of a single commodity with those in the "General Price Level" is only suggesting that we treat price movements with the same scientific check that we use in other investigations. This would in many cases avoid erroneous conclusions as to which of several factors affecting price may be the most important at a particular time.

It is obvious that there is much to be done by the Extension Economist in explaining the "whys and wherefors" of economic changes. It is also obvious that unless this work is based on a careful study of the facts, and the results presented accurately and impartially it will make little contribution to the field of education.

The extension economist with the help of the county agents also can perform a valuable service in bringing together the knowledge which farmers have accumulated on the matter of adjustments. They have tried, through the years, many crops and many methods. Through this experimentation they have found out things and ways that succeed and pay better than others. This local knowledge may be as significant for the upbuilding of the community as anything brought in from the outside.

Many farm record books are distributed to farmers each year and assistance given in analyzing and studying the facts concerning their farm businesses. It is becoming more evident that the use which can be made of such farm records is not confined to the farmer. A large number of records in the hands of farmers will serve as a ready source of information which might be quickly assembled as a guide for regional and national planning. As similar information is obtained from year to year, an appraisal can be made of the effects of various adjustments on their income. Participation on the part of farmers in a program of this sort is one of the best ways to make them feel the importance of their place in the composite picture of American agriculture. The Extension economists in practically all states are planning at the present time to arrange for bringing together the largest accumulation of local data on farm management that has ever been available. For maximum results this project should be conducted cooperatively by research and extension.

EXTENSION WORK AS RELATED TO REGIONAL PLANNING

Before concluding, there is another point which seems important in the approach that is being made to this regional adjustment problem. The science of farm management would not have grown to the point that it is today if it had been developed by applying general economic principles to the farm. However, by studying the problems on the farm, and then using the knowledge gained in many fields adequate solutions were determined and practices based upon them were established. Studies are now being made to determine locally what problems exist, and what adjustments seem to be needed. These facts can then be treated in conjunction with similar facts from other areas, and in line with regional and national trends. This approach recognizes local conditions but also takes into account the fact that the farmer's profits and welfare are not only determined by what he does himself on his own farm but by what other farmers are doing in other states, other regions, and throughout the nations of the world. His profits are also dependent on the status of other industries and peoples. All these matters enter into extension program making at the present time.

The function of the Extension Economist in Regional Planning is primarily the same as in any other phase of his work. The primary objective is to improve the economic position of the farmer through the development of a more thorough understanding of the adjustments needed in farm organization and operation, in marketing, and in public problems related to agriculture. The work is planned to make agricultural educational programs: (a) sound economically, (b) better adapted to local conditions, but consistent with national programs and trends, (c) closely related to the newest material and research available, and (d) more effective through the use of the best experience in educational methods.