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PROCEEDINGS

of the

WESTERN FARM ECONOMICS ASSOCIATION

Ninth Annual Meeting

July 30, 31 and Aug. 1, 1936

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

Laramie, Wyoming

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Agricultural Experiment Station
Bozeman, Montana

RESEARCH IN THE RURAL INSTITUTIONAL ASPECTS OF AGRICULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

by

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A paper presented at the Western Farm Economics Association
Meeting held at Laramie, Wyoming, July 30 and
31, and August 1, 1936.

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R. R. Renne

A true agricultural adjustment program is designed to secure the best use of a given piece or area of land. This cannot be accomplished without efficient local government and adequate community facilities or public services. Yet adjustments in production patterns (either planned or unplanned) and farm organization have been effected without any corresponding changes being made in rural institutional patterns and community organization. This is due in part to the complexity of the problem of reorganizing local government and in part to the difficulty of getting such proposed reorganizations effected. The result is that our adjustment programs have not attained their maximum possible effectiveness.

Importance of Rural Institutional Aspects

There are several reasons why the rural institutional aspects of land use planning are vital to its success. Efficient local government and a pattern of community organization adapted to the basic natural conditions of the area mean: (1) Lower taxes and consequent lower overhead costs for farmers; (2) more adequate and desirable community services in keeping with reasonably high living standards; and (3) better coordinated and centralized governmental units which enable adjustment programs to be adopted more promptly and effectively.

Farmers, as a rule, are not able to shift their taxes and although for any one year the taxes may be equal to but a small percentage of total costs of production, nevertheless they are an additional cost over and above production expenses. Moreover, because they are levied on general property, they are levied each year regardless of the net income or loss of the farmer and in this sense are cumulative in their effects. The extremely heavy farm tax delinquency and the amount of land taken through tax deed by counties and other public agencies in recent years is ample evidence of the importance of the tax burden, particularly in the Great Plains area. While a large portion of this burden is due to our reliance upon the inflexible general property tax which is particularly severe on farmers and home owners, a considerable portion is due to the overdevelopment of local government.

Perhaps the greatest maladjustment resulting from land booms and over-speculation, viewed over the long pull, is the over-expansion of governmental services and the resulting confiscatory costs of local government. The stern law of the survival of the fittest does not seem so prompt and efficient in correcting maladjustments in local governments as it does in bankrupting individual business units and correcting the weaknesses resulting from inefficient farm units. The withholding power of a group or governmental unit, no matter how small, is better than that of the average individual and when prejudice and tradition are added for good measure, the reason for the survival of certain local governmental units is clear. Yet, because much of our present community structure of schools, roads, and other services is predicated upon a land utilization pattern which has proved itself not well adapted to the basic natural resources of most areas, it is imperative that we work out and strive to effect adjustments in rural institutional organization and services whenever desirable changes are to be effected in the

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production pattern.

Governments are now being called upon to render additional services which they have never been called upon to render before. Under conditions of free land and a pioneer economy the principal function of government was to protect the citizens against Indian onslaughts and to maintain peace and order among themselves. A decentralized, non-interventionist type of government prevailed. Today governments are expected to furnish us not only with individual physical protection, but with economic and social security implicit in the opportunity to earn a living. Our desire now is to get security and stability by means of concentrating power in the hands of responsible bodies that can act in a coordinated way with collective forethought and foresight. The problem is, of course, how to get this necessary centralization of power and greater control of economic and individual activities and yet allow for flexibility for individual liberty which is implied in our democratic ideal.

It is not necessary for me to cite here the controversies which have arisen over how this problem is to be solved. It is all well and good to talk naively about a return to local control and responsibility in order that the riotous run on the federal trough be checked. But the fact remains that local responsibility, acting within present local governmental patterns, has bogged down miserably. Not only have the small, weak and uncoordinated structures within which local government operates made it impossible for local groups to cope with local relief and adjustment problems, but their very weakness and lack of coordination has definitely weakened and hindered the state and federal programs. Because of these weaknesses in the structure of primary units, the programs of the larger secondary units have lacked coordination of purpose and effort. Contrary to the view held by some that a strong federal government means of necessity that the state and local governments must be weak and powerless, a strong central government, with continued foresight to work out and effect far-reaching economic and social adjustments, cannot exist in a democracy without strong, well coordinated and responsible local governmental units. Not until our local governments are made into well planned, responsible administrative units will we in a democratic way be able to effect promptly the adjustments necessary to reduce existing maladjustments to a minimum.

The above should serve as a background or foundation to show not only the desirability but the necessity of studying community organization and services and securing adjustments in rural institutional patterns at the same time adjustments in production techniques and land use patterns are effected. The political considerations and local antagonisms and prejudices so frequently aroused when changes are proposed in the structure of rural institutions have caused most workers to steer shy of these phases, and thus contribute their share to the so-called "social lag" with which we are all familiar. Others argue that proper attitudes toward local governmental reform can come only after generations and generations of living together. Others argue that research of this sort does not lend itself to scientific procedure and that the trained agricultural economists and scientific experts have no business meddling with such matters. In this connection it should not be forgotten that only a few years back several proposed adjustment programs now becoming generally accepted would have been considered unscientific, impracticable and absurd.

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The writer does not want to belittle the problems and dangers associated with such research because they are very real indeed. Yet as public employees do we not have as much responsibility to work out and strive to effect adjustments in these local administrative and service units as we have in working out and effecting new production techniques and land use patterns? We may employ specialists in public finance and government to do the detailed work but must not the agricultural economist coordinate the individual production and community institutional phases if agricultural planning is to render its fullest effectiveness in increasing the standards of living and well-being of the rural people? Should not our philosophy be that if it is desirable it should be possible?

Types of Research Needed

It is impossible within the limits of this paper to discuss all of the types and phases of research that are needed in the rural institutional aspects of agricultural adjustment. Only a few of the more important ones can be mentioned. A brief analysis of possible research procedure will then be presented for each of these more important types, followed by a brief summary of some of the principal findings that have been secured where such research has been done.

The primary object of research in the rural institutional aspects of agricultural adjustment is to determine the size and character of local governmental units that are best fitted to furnish community services efficiently. In some areas, particularly the older settled and more diversified sections, agricultural adjustment concerns itself more with making changes in land use and management practices within the present farm units rather than with changing the size and entire character of the farm unit itself. In such areas, research in the rural institutional aspects of agricultural adjustment deals with improving the quality and efficiency of public services already offered. But in areas where agricultural adjustment involves taking land out of one large use type and putting it into another, thus changing the size of the farm unit and the population pattern of the community, rural institutional research must deal first of all with what changes in the number and character of local services could and should accompany such agricultural adjustment, and second with what institutional pattern is best fitted to furnish these revised services most efficiently. One is a more static concept of improving local governmental services as we now know them; the other is the more dynamic and difficult one of changing present services as well as the structure of the institutions furnishing them. Needless to say the latter is the more realistic one as far as most of the Great Plains region and the western states are concerned.

More specifically research is needed to show what changes in services, revenues, and expenditures of county, city, and school district or township governments may accompany or result from the agricultural adjustment program. In the case of services, how many miles of roads may be closed and what new roads will be needed? What schools may be closed and what are the possibilities of eliminating school districts and numerous school board officers? What new school plant and equipment will be needed? What reduction will likely occur in the number and location of relief clients? In the case of revenues, how much will the tax base of the various units of government be reduced or increased through agricultural adjustment? What will the prospective income be to these governmental units after the adjustment program is

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Put into effect compared with present income? What changes in state aid or county aid payments are likely? What receipts are likely from the paying up of delinquent taxes from previous years? In the case of expenditures, what will be the probable per pupil expense for schooling compared with present expenditures? What will be the corresponding expenditures for certain governmental services such as roads, assessment and collection of taxes, poor relief, policing and protection of property, and general administration?

In addition to the above specific questions, the research should show clearly which, if any, of these adjustments are possible without an agricultural adjustment program, and what ones are entirely contingent upon such a program. Which of these adjustments are most likely to be made as a result of the agricultural adjustment program? These might be classified by type of adjustment such as transfer of functions, discontinuance of services, consolidation, internal reorganization, etc. Present laws and established procedures should be analyzed to determine whether they encourage or retard these adjustments. For example, are statutory or constitutional provisions regarding outstanding debt retarding school district or county consolidations, and does the present basis for distributing state aid funds hinder reorganization? Also, what legislation is needed to modify certain procedures or to grant new or additional authority to make necessary or desirable local governmental adjustments?

Research which would answer the above questions would do much to clear up many issues in the minds of farmers, local taxpayers, and office holders upon which they now have only a confused or in many cases a distorted notion. These have contributed much to the general confusion and misunderstanding of the purposes and possibilities of agricultural adjustment. How can the correct answers to these questions best be procured? Or, in other words, what research procedure is recommended for analyzing these various phases?

Possible Research Procedure

The first step in rural institutional research as related to agricultural adjustment should be the determination or establishment of certain standards or indices of local governmental efficiency. That is, what basic factors determine the efficiency with which local governmental services are rendered? This research is fundamental because it provides a framework for the reorganization of governmental units. Since as much as seventy per cent or three-fourths of the taxes paid by western farmers (70 cents of every dollar paid in taxes by Montana farmers) is levied by the county, this unit of rural government is a good place to begin research. A county office is popularly acclaimed to be efficiently managed if the total costs of that office are less than the costs of the preceding year or period of years, or if they are less than those of the same office in neighboring counties or in counties of similar size. But efficiency cannot be measured by comparing expenditures alone. Any scientific attempt to measure governmental efficiency should give consideration to the amount and quality of services performed by the governmental unit in meeting the demands made upon it by the public as well as to the cost. The problem is how to measure as accurately as possible the quality and amount of services rendered the public or the work done by the office. Expenditure data are readily available.

If a numerical record is secured for each county office for those services which require the bulk of the time and labor of that office, and if each duty is given a weight approximating its relative importance or proportion of total

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time of the office required to render it, a composite weighted measure of work units can be secured which will indicate quite well the amount of work done by the office. Dividing the total expenditures of the office by the total units of work gives the total cost per unit of work done. Comparing the relative unit costs of a given office for all counties within a state or region and correlating these unit costs with the training and experience of the administrative officers and the volume of work, reveals the relationship, if any, of these factors to efficiency or low unit costs. If the analysis shows a certain minimum volume of work appears necessary to get comparatively low unit costs, the reorganization program should work toward securing the size of office which would get about that volume of work. If a certain amount of training or experience of the administrative officers appears essential to secure low unit costs, the reorganization program should strive to secure legislation requiring these minimum qualifications for such county officers before they could be candidates for the office, and should also assure tenure of office to accomplish continued efficiency.

It is obvious that the above method has its limitations. Some of the duties of each county office are of such a nature that the amount of work done in performing them cannot be expressed quantitatively. And, even if a numerical measure were possible in every case, no account would be given of the quality of the services rendered. However, granting that any measure must necessarily be an estimate, the above method is admittedly more scientific than the present popular standard of comparing expenditures alone. In Montana it so happens that the more important duties of the principal county offices lend themselves to quantitative or numerical measurement, and in addition these principal duties are mostly established and standardized by the state legislature so that the problem of quality is largely solved. ^{1/}

^{1/} For a more detailed discussion of the method and statistical measurements used see the author's treatment in Montana Experiment Station Bulletin No. 298, "Montana County Organization, Services, and Costs", April, 1935, or "Measuring the Efficiency of County Government", National Municipal Review, Volume 24, No. 3, March, 1935.

The results and possible applications of the findings secured by the above procedure are given at a later place in this paper.

Schools comprise the largest single item of local governmental expense in the western states. In the case of Montana, schools (elementary and high school) take 46 cents of the farmers' tax dollar, while county administration which is second in size takes only 16 cents. Research in rural school organization and administration is therefore particularly pertinent in an agricultural adjustment program. Yet very little competent research has been done along this line in some states. In the case of Montana there were no accurate data or maps readily available showing the number and boundaries of the various school districts of the state or the location of operating and closed schools at the beginning of 1934. In order to secure this information for agricultural planning work, questionnaires had to be sent out to the clerks of the different school districts.

Assuming the above information is readily available and maps are also available by counties showing all school district boundaries, location of school houses - both those operating and closed, and all roads - ungraded, graded, and all-weather, the next step is to locate all children accurately on the quarter-section or section of land upon which their parents live.

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The children may be divided into three groups and different colors used to indicate each group - those under 6 years old or pre-school age, those 6 to 14 or those now in the grades, and those 14 to 18 or high school students. With this information and a careful first-hand check of the topography and climate of the country and the character of the roads, the worker is able to determine what changes can be made in the school pattern and what corresponding savings might be secured thereby.

In many cases it will be found that several families have moved out in recent years and that a reorganization of the school pattern would result in material savings without any accompanying serious inconveniences. In others, the population may not have changed but improved road and transportation facilities may make possible far-reaching reorganizations and material savings. In those areas where the federal government is purchasing land and planning to move certain families to other areas, additional savings may be possible. In such cases the research worker must locate these families and their children and make a new map showing the school child pattern which will be established when these families are moved. From this pattern a reorganization of school services can be worked out and estimated savings computed. Certain minimum standards have been set up by education specialists for a satisfactory grade school and satisfactory high school and these standards should be kept carefully in mind in any reorganization proposals.

The federal land purchase and resettlement program has raised many questions in the minds of local taxpayers. City property owners are afraid the increase in federal holdings and the moving out of the county of as much as one-seventh of the resident owners (in one Montana county) will reduce greatly the taxable value of farm property and shift a large part of the burden of supporting governmental services to them. Farmers remaining in the area fear their tax burdens may become confiscatory. Research in this phase of agricultural adjustment should show what future annual income for the support of local government may be reasonably expected from these federal purchase lands compared with present revenue now being secured by local governments from these same lands.

It is assumed that the federal government will lease the lands it purchases to stockmen and that one-half the gross annual revenues from such leases will be given to the counties to be in turn divided proportionately among the various services including schools. An average figure showing the probably annual lease returns can be computed from a classification of the lands based on a soil reconnaissance to determine their grazing capacity, and the average farm price of beef over a comparatively long period such as 1890-1930. These two factors together would indicate approximately the average lease rates stockmen might reasonably pay for such lands. Several years might need to elapse before these lands would be able to carry the amount indicated by the soil reconnaissance because of recent overgrazing and depletion of the range accompanying the drouth, and lower estimated lease returns for the first years would be necessary. Present revenue from these same lands is readily available from the tax assessment and delinquent rolls in the county offices. A ten year tax history record on these lands showing the trend of assessments and tax payments would also help to reveal what the probable future revenue from these lands would be if no land purchase or adjustment program were adopted.

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In addition to the average annual lease returns which would be secured from the federal purchase lands, local governments would get immediate cash returns from (1) The cash payment per acre made to the counties by the federal government for their lands acquired through tax deed; and (2) the income which will be obtained from the payment of delinquent taxes that have accrued against private lands that are sold to the government. The proportionate share of local, state and county indebtedness against the tax deed lands can be computed and a comparison made with the sale price being paid by the federal government. An analysis of the county tax deed land leasing and sale record will reveal what success the county commissioners have had in disposing of such lands and what rate of return the local governmental units have secured from their investment (delinquent taxes) in such lands. This record can then be compared with the returns which would be secured from selling such lands to Uncle Sam. A further analysis of the trend of tax delinquency and the amount of land becoming subject to tax deed in recent years would give some idea of the amount of back taxes which local governmental units would get which they undoubtedly would never secure otherwise.

Some Research Findings and their Application

Space does not permit a more detailed analysis of possible procedures in answering the questions raised in the early part of this paper. The sketchy procedure outlined is indeed very incomplete. We must turn now to some results which have been accomplished by using the above procedures and see what significance these findings or their application may have in an agricultural adjustment program.

The procedure mentioned for measuring county office efficiency by the unit cost analysis method was followed for each of the six principal county offices in Montana: namely, clerk and recorder, treasurer, assessor, sheriff, clerk of court, and superintendent of schools. It was found that the least efficient (highest unit cost) clerk and recorder office had unit costs approximately three times as great as the most efficient clerk and recorder office; the unit cost of the least efficient treasurer office were five times as great as the most efficient; for assessor offices they were seven times as great; for clerk of court offices, thirteen times as great; for superintendent of schools offices, about six times as great; and for sheriff offices, fifteen times as great.

Why are there such wide variations as these in efficiency or unit costs? What conditions or set of factors seem to be associated with high efficiency? What changes are necessary in county organization and administration to make these favorable conditions more general? How can these changes be made most expediently? Briefly it was found that training and experience of administrative personnel and volume of work were the principal determinants of efficiency. The training and experience of county administrative personnel would be greatly improved by raising the qualifications to hold office. One effective means of raising the standards for qualifications to hold office is to require all candidates to be examined by a State civil service commission. Increasing terms of office to at least four years where the terms are now only two years would reduce the high rate of turnover and the too frequent induction of inexperienced men into office. A sufficient volume of work could be secured largely by eliminating the present extreme departmentalization in county government, thus reducing the number of independent, elective, administrative offices and putting the affairs of the county under the general direction of one chief

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executive. The county manager plan is an effective means of accomplishing this, and its marked success where it has been given a fair trial illustrates the advantages of a coordinated and responsible government.

Were such a coordinated and responsible form of county government established it would be possible to build up a profession of county administration. The character and ability of such personnel under this system would certainly enable the present services to be rendered more efficiently and would form an important cog in the chain for better government generally. With such coordinated county units the work of planning and effecting agricultural adjustment programs would be greatly facilitated.

The procedure mentioned for analyzing school services and possible savings resulting from reorganization of such services accompanying agricultural adjustment programs, was followed for a few selected counties in Montana. In one central Montana county a planned reorganization of all the grade schools by completely ignoring school district boundaries and moving some schoolhouses more to the center of pupil groups they were to serve, showed that annual grade school costs for that county could be reduced approximately eighteen per cent, and in no case would any child be more than three miles from a school. In another county a planned reorganization so that no child would be more than five miles from a school and allowing for transportation costs, would reduce annual grade school costs by approximately forty-eight per cent. In several other counties the number of schools needed could be reduced appreciably if present school district boundaries were eliminated and schools shifted. These boundaries were determined and established when the population pattern and transportation facilities were very much different from those of the present. Yet, largely because of the lack of a centralized and coordinated system of school administration, a long lag occurs between the time these changes are needed and the time they are effected, with resulting loss to the pupils and generally higher school taxes.

But reorganization of school services and support in keeping with adjustments in land use would do more than merely reduce farm taxes. Such a reorganization would do much to (1) Reduce inequalities in educational opportunities which now exist between rural and urban children and between children of different school administrative units, (2) smooth out inequalities in tax burdens between taxpayers of different school districts, (3) help to maintain more uniform and adequate support for rural education, particularly during depression periods, and (4) create a better educational environment for effective teaching. The importance of these aspects for a successful democracy and effective social planning cannot be overemphasized.

An analysis of how the federal land purchase program will affect local governments was made for nine Montana counties. Using the procedure referred to previously it was found that the estimated annual revenue which would be secured by local governments from the new public domain of 4,356,000 acres, assuming they would get half the annual lease returns and that the 2,753,000 acres of privately-owned lands listed for sale to the federal government in these counties are actually sold to Uncle Sam, would be about \$154,000 compared with the \$127,000 of revenue which was actually secured from these same 4,356,000 acres in 1934. ^{2/}

^{2/} See the author's analysis in "Probable Effects of Federal Land Purchase on Local Government", National Municipal Review, Vol. 25, No. 7, July, 1936.

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These 4,356,000 acres include, in addition to the 2,753,000 acres of privately-owned lands listed for sale, 1,173,000 of federal land already in these counties and from which local governments get no revenue, and 439,000 acres of county-owned lands of which the county commissioners were able to lease but 171,000 acres in 1934. It should not be forgotten that these estimated returns under the new program are based on a forty-year average price of beef, while the 1934 returns are those in a low price depression year. However, the taxpaying ability of these lands is being decreased annually because of misuse and over-grazing, while with the controlled grazing and blocking out of the range into economical units the carrying capacity and lease returns should be built up to a level considerably above that of the present.

The relationship between present income and probable future annual income under the federal purchase program varied considerably between the nine counties. The annual revenue under the new program will be greater than current revenue in six of them, the increase varying from 22 to 99 per cent. In the other three counties the expected revenue will be less than the present, the decrease varying from 4 to 20 per cent. This variation is due to a combination of factors, chiefly the following: (1) Variation between counties in the proportion of their land area now comprised of federal holdings and upon which they now get no revenue, but upon which they will probably get half the lease returns if the new program is effected; (2) the difference in the extent of tax delinquency between counties, which in turn depends principally upon the extent of over-speculation in land values, improper utilization of the soil, and relative efficiency of the local governments; and (3) the relative ability of the county commissioners to sell or lease county lands which have been taken by tax deed because of continued tax delinquency.

In no county of the nine was the proportionate share of the local indebtedness against the county-owned lands equal to the sale price which the county will receive from the federal government. For the nine counties as a whole, the amount received will be six and one-half times as much as the proportionate indebtedness. In addition to these returns from selling the county lands, these nine counties will receive a large sum from delinquent taxes which have accumulated against the 2,753,000 acres of privately-owned lands listed for sale to the government. The estimated total delinquent taxes accumulated against these acres is \$758,000, 28 per cent of these lands being delinquent three years or more in tax payments. Undoubtedly a large number of the owners of these lands would not be able to pay up all these back taxes, but would allow the lands to go to the county through tax deed. At least this has been the experience of the past. The federal government is the only agency with the resources to buy up these lands and enable the necessary adjustments to be made in an orderly and efficient manner.

Studies made in two of the nine counties indicate that school costs can be reduced by between one-third and one-half if reorganizations in school services made possible by the new population pattern are effected. Costs of county government could be reduced from one-sixth to one-fifth through reduction in road construction and maintenance costs, decreased number of assessments, less general bookkeeping and other clerical and administrative work. These estimates are based on the assumption that the families who sell their lands to the government and want to be resettled elsewhere will be resettled. Whether these possible savings will be secured depends upon whether local taxpayers and office-holders will make the adjustments in local governments made possible by the land purchase program.

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Summary and Conclusions

The importance to a successful agricultural adjustment program of research in local government and community organization designed to secure data upon which effective adjustments in rural institutional patterns can be based, cannot be overemphasized. The research that has been done to date is inadequate and incomplete. Not only should additional research along these lines be planned and executed, but citizens and taxpayers should be made to think in terms of governmental planning and reorganization of rural institutions and services just as they are learning to appreciate the need of land use planning and adjustments in our farm production patterns. We all have a part in helping to reduce the amount of lag in regulating and improving human relations compared with our pace of utilizing inanimate substances and energies. In many cases that part may be effectively rendered merely by an open-minded and sympathetic attitude toward research in some of the phases mentioned.

The results of the preliminary research discussed show rather conclusively that the agricultural adjustment program, including federal land purchase and resettlement, will not merely assist in correcting fundamental maladjustments resulting from faulty land use and production techniques in the western states, but will also be decidedly beneficial to local governments. If all or most of the adjustments in local government and community services made possible by the program are effected, far-reaching and permanent social benefits will be achieved. Whether these adjustments are made remains to be seen, but is it not reasonable to believe that economic evolution through the stern law of the survival of the fittest will eventually force these adjustments in a disorderly and painful fashion, if we do not make them in a planned and orderly way through group action?