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Research and Marketing Advisory Committees

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Advisory committees have played a prominent role in shaping the program of research and related activities developed under the Research and Marketing Act of 1946. They have exerted a broadening influence on agricultural research generally since they were formally authorized in that legislation. While the use of advisory committees for guidance of public research did not originate with this particular program, the distinctly greater importance they have assumed over the past 8 years amounts to a new force in agricultural research. Moreover, it is a force that is here to stay. It therefore behooves researchers as well as administrators of research to become more familiar with the reasons for the establishment of these committees, the nature of their activities, and the scope and purpose of their operations.

Why advisory committees?

The question of why such committees were provided for in agricultural research and marketing legislation is not fully answered in the following statement in the bill:

> In the furtherance of the research and service work authorized by this Act, the Secretary of Agriculture may, in addition to the National advisory committee, establish appropriate committees, including representatives of producers, industry, government, and science, to assist in effectuating specific research and service program.

Probably a more enlightening answer is that we were outgrowing the previously established system of handling appropriations.

This reason was particularly pertinent as applied to research, but it was not confined to research. Significantly, at the time the Research and Marketing Act was being formulated, advisory boards, commissions, or committees were being advocated by agricultural leaders in relation to several federal programs. The late Albert Goss, as the highly respected Master of the National Grange, was particularly outspoken and effective in recommending them for agricultural programs. He felt that busy legislative committees were unable to follow operations of large widespread activities sufficiently to exercise intelligent judgment on proposals for detailed adjustments in appropriations.

The problem was especially acute for research because much of the work and many of the research results were presented in technical language that was not entirely intelligible to the nonscientist. In fact a good share of the research tended to become so specialized that research administrators as well as legislators frequently felt the need for assistance from scientists in specialized fields to help them evaluate research proposals and findings. As a result communications between scientists and the people, including their legislative representatives, tended to

break down. A feeling arose that something was needed to bring agricultural research "down to earth" to deal effectively with current practical problems in agricultural production and marketing.

Complaints from research agencies that available funds were insufficient to allow for new work on important problems became so repetitious as to be regarded as trite. They were also interpreted as evidence of inflexibility of programs or laxity of administration. The tangible benefits from research, even as dramatic as those of hybrid corn and penicillin, somehow or other did not kindle the faith in agricultural science that would lead to greater support.

In fact, public criticism of agricultural research and researchers was mounting. Many people were impatient with some of the time-consuming and sometimes seemingly irrelevant work being done. Many criticized the researcher's technical language as a smokescreen used to obscure what was or was not being accomplished. In other instances, notably in the social sciences, outright antagonism appeared among legislators. In part, perhaps, this feeling arose from lack of understanding of some phases of research; but it also reflected doubt by the lawmakers that they shared the objectives of the scientists. Therefore, appropriations for agricultural research tended not to expand, and in some cases were sharply curtailed.

Agricultural research stood still

Except for the utilization research program in the regional research laboratories which began in 1938, agricultural research received no substantial increases in federal appropriations for about two decades before the Research and Marketing Act. No widespread demand for expanded research appeared, other than that engendered by the farm chemurgic movement.

Agricultural research simply failed to keep pace with rapid expansion in other federal government programs. This was particularly apparent when agricultural research was compared with either federal agricultural activities generally or with all federal research activities. In 1932 research made up 24 percent of total USDA appropriations for regular activities--in 1955 research made up 9 percent. In 1940, the earliest year for which we have comparable data, agricultural research comprised 40 percent of total federal research. In 1955 it is less than 4 percent.

Conditions for expansion

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The Research and Marketing Act authorized substantial expansion in agricultural research, education, and service. Agricultural leaders foresaw the need for changes in methods of administering research programs and of appropriating for the work on the much larger scale contemplated. Therefore, the act included provisions in broad outline to permit the expected changes. However, during the first six years of the program authorizations for reorganized administration were not used to

the extent visualized by the legislators. This was cited as a reason why the authorized appropriations were not realized.[1/]

Authorization for advisory committees, on the other hand, was used to a high degree and met with favorable Congressional reaction. Within a matter of months after the passage of the act and the required National Advisory Committee began to function, 19 commodity and 3 functional advisory committees were established. Subsequently this number was reduced somewhat, but has since been increased to 26 to provide more complete coverage of the total research program.

Although Congressional approval of the general operations of the advisory committee system has been expressed repeatedly, Congressional committees have not relinquished their prerogatives for examination and amendment of agricultural research programs. They continue to inquire into the operations and to provide direction through control of appropriations. Nevertheless, they do so with assurance that the research program is being reviewed by persons qualified to judge and that it is responding to practical needs. The recent trend of agricultural research appropriations reflects this improvement.

Improved communications

Advisory committees have clearly contributed to increasing public interest in agricultural research and its potentialities. They have distinctly improved communications between the scientists and the people and also between the people and those responsible for federal budgets. This has been a relatively slow process, but the results are beginning to show in greater support for the work.

Both the attitudes and operations of the advisory committees have altered considerably since they started. The same is true of the researchers and administrators in relation to the committees. Experience gained in explaining research proposals and reporting research results to committees has improved the liaison between the scientists and nonscientists.

Researchers did not all take kindly to the idea of reporting to and being cross examined by nonprofessional advisory groups. They frequently proved to be very poor salesmen of their wares. In general, there was a high positive correlation among those who didn't like advisory committees and those who experienced trouble before Congressional committees.

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But advisory committees were able to take more time to listen than the legislative committees. Also, they tended to be more patient in acquiring an understanding of the researcher's work. When the scientists realized they were dealing with a basically sympathetic audience in most instances, they appreciated having important recipients of research take an interest in their work. When the advisory committee members realized the motivations of the scientists, the objectives they were seeking, the skills they had to offer, the faith and confidence they had in their work

1/ A Visualized Program for Marketing. Speech by Congressman Clifford R. Hope before the U.S. Department of Agriculture Graduate School, 1951.

despite low pay and criticism, the members experienced real pleasure in becoming acquainted with them and helping them. A spirit of mutual confidence and respect has gradually developed.

Appreciation of the value of advisory committees has grown steadily. Research administrators now actively seek the establishment of new committees to cover work not adequately reviewed by existing committees. The problem of adequately servicing the committees is the main limiting factor.

Activities altered

At the outset the thought was that the advisory committees would be a major source of research proposals brought to the department. Over time the committees have tended to rely more upon the researchers to orginate the proposals. While committees continue to present proposals, they function more in evaluating the relative importance of problems and ideas that come to them from a variety of sources, but mainly from the research agencies.

In the beginning many committee members exhibited the natural tendency of businessmen to assume administrative functions. With recognition that responsibility for decisions must rest with administrators and responsibility for devising research projects and methods to solve recommended problems must rest with the scientists, the committee members have functioned more in a truly advisory capacity.

Advisory committees exhibit characteristic reactions to different types of research. While the reactions are not entirely uniform, in general they tend to favor applied research over basic research, short-time research over long-time research, biological and physical research over social research, and service types of research over theoretical research. These tendencies have been tempered considerably as the members have become more familiar with the potentialities and prospects for the different types of research as well as the need for balanced programs. It is not unusual now to find fundamental scientific work receive a high priority rating from a committee especially where they have acquired respect for the qualifications of the scientists. It will probably surprise economists to note that the Food Distribution Advisory Committee gave highest priority at its last meeting to studies of costs and margins.

As committee membership has been rotated to provide for wider participation and new blood, recognition has been given to the need for representation of research technicians and administrators on them. Such representation drawn from nonfederal sources now appears on most committees, but it has been maintained as a distinct minority representation. Otherwise the very effective jobs advisory committees are performing in assuring greater practicability of research, increasing public confidence, and achieving broader understanding and interest in agricultural research could be jeopardized.

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Recommendations are reported by the committees on the basis of their appraisals of proposals for new work and progress of going work. The reports are circulated to all state and federal agencies participating in the Research and Marketing Act program. Agricultural research agencies in the U.S. Department of Agriculture take these recommendations

most seriously and endeavor to respond to them. Response is encouraged by the degree to which the annual budgets are built upon the foundation of these recommendations.

On the whole, the foresight of agricultural leaders in providing for advisory committees as a means of stimulating and improving research has been vindicated. The effects have not been confined to the Research and Marketing Act program because it was soon recognized the RMA work could not be reviewed and expanded independently of research financed from other sources. The advisory committee members have been invited to examine all phases of the department's research and associated activities. This has extended the committee influence to all phases of related work.

Although extension and service programs and nonfederal research programs are not reported to the Research and Marketing Advisory Committees to the same degree or in the same detail as federal research, there is little question that they are benefiting from the more sustained interest in agricultural research and associated activities instilled by the committees.

For most committees the membership can be regarded as a good cross section of the clientele being served by the respective areas of research. With representation of farmers, farm organizations, geographic regions, and different types and sizes of related marketing firms, the committees are in position to express views of the variable groups on whom the research under review may have impact.

These views provide useful guidance on administrative problems. Inasmuch as several agencies in the Department of Agriculture report to each committee, the members acquire a perspective simulating that needed by those holding broad administrative authority. Committee review has, consequently, contributed significantly to coordination and integration of activities between scientists of different disciplines, between programs of different government agencies, and between industry and public research agencies. They have exerted influence through their recommendations toward more comprehensive and balanced approaches to problem solution. This is important in view of the fact that agricultural research can no longer be regarded as the work of individual geniuses.

In dealing with administrative matters there is always some risk of having committees reflect in their recommendations the fixed views or opinions of a few dominant committeemen with specific objectives not necessarily consonant with public-service activities. On the other hand, committees effectively direct administrative attention to the need for over-all blueprints of work extending across the jurisdictions of agencies appearing before them. This approach points up strengths and weaknesses of existing programs and indicates opportunities for planned future development to bolster the weakest links.

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In any event the expressions of advisory committees on administrative matters must always be regarded as only one of several points of view or types of appraisal that should be taken into account by administrators in decision-making. It is the point of view that will probably give major emphasis to the relative importance and immediacy of problems before industry requiring solution.

Other points of view include (1) those of administrators having immediate supervisory responsibilities who will tend to give greater emphasis to availability of facilities, equipment, personnel, and other resources available to them for work on proposed research, (2) those of the scientists or researchers themselves who will place greater weight on what they would like to do, what research tools or techniques could be used, what work would offer opportunities of acquiring new scientific knowledge, (3) those of legislators, particularly on related committees, whose types of emphasis have already been discussed, and (4) those of budgetary officials who emphasize conservation of public expenditures.

These points of view are usually conflicting in some degree because of the variable weights placed upon relevant factors by the different groups. Good administration gives due consideration to all the factors, adjusts for variable emphasis placed upon them, and reconciles the differences to the fullest extent possible. In the crucible of program formulation the advisory committees supply an important ingredient.

In summation, the contributions of advisory committees to improved communications, more thorough program appraisal, and more broad-gauged administration add up to a tidy total well worth the cost.