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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
Economic Research ServiceOpening Remarks by M. L. Upchurch, Administrator  
at the National Agricultural Outlook Conference  
Washington, D.C., Monday, February 17, 1969

Those of you who are regular participants in past Outlook Conferences will notice some departure in this program from the traditional format. These departures warrant some explanation.

Among the changes is the fact that you are here in February instead of November. The change in date stems from other changes, so let me comment on them first.

American agriculture is becoming increasingly commercialized. Farmers always have wanted to make money, but now it takes increasing money to farm. The farm supply business; farming itself; and the businesses that assemble, process, and distribute farm products increasingly look like an industrial complex--albeit with unique features. Thus, they affect and are affected by the state of the national economy and national economic policies and programs. National policies regarding growth in GNP, taxation, wages, inflation, interest rates, and foreign trade--to name a few--are often as important to the outlook for farmers and managers of farm-related businesses as the supply of soybeans or price supports on peanuts.

In addition to commercial agriculture, the outlook for the many rural people who are not directly connected with farming is affected by general economic policies and programs relatively more than production and price prospects for farm products.

In recognition of the changing needs for outlook information or of the needs for different kinds of outlook information, we are devoting relatively more time this year than ever before to selected aspects of the national economy. We feel that by doing this we can increase the usefulness of this Conference, especially for Extension economists who handle outlook programs in their home States. We feel that this emphasis better complements their own efforts to conduct an effective outlook program at home.

If we are to give greater emphasis to national economic issues in our Outlook Conference, a change from our traditional November date is logical. Much data and much thinking on the state of and prospects for our economy

become available and can be made public after January each year. The State of the Union message, the annual report of the Council of Economic Advisers, the Federal Budget, and other important documents are available after January. These are vital in any meaningful discussions of the economic outlook. Thus we chose the February date for our Outlook Conference.

We gained some advantage and made some sacrifice in shifting from November to February for our Outlook Conference. We are fully aware that this change reduces the timeliness and usefulness of the Outlook Conference for some Extension economists and for some farmers. But what time would serve the greatest number best? Cotton producers in Mississippi, corn producers in Iowa, potato producers in Idaho need help with outlook information at different times in the year. Cattle feeders and poultry producers need help with outlook information at all times in the year. So we gave up our search for the best time for a National Outlook Conference as judged by the needs of farm producers.

Another factor was involved in our decision to shift emphasis in the National Outlook Conference. When these conferences were started more than forty years ago, few States had trained Extension economists to give professional competence to a program of outlook information. Now most State Extension Services have people who bring a high degree of professional skill to this work. They have more and better information available to them. They can develop, adapt, and disseminate outlook information specifically for the needs of their farmers and agricultural businesses with great skill. Our Outlook Conference, at the national level, should strive to support and supplement their work--not to substitute for it.

With an increasingly commercialized agriculture, the needs for outlook information on commodities become highly specific for specialized producers. The timing and content of such information must be tailored to their needs if it is to be most useful. Thus I urge strengthening outlook information programs within each State whenever possible.

I urge also better development and wider use of regional outlook conferences. In subject matter and timing, these can be fitted better to the needs of Extension economists and the agricultural industry of a region than we can possibly achieve in a single annual National Agricultural Outlook Conference. To further this view I have pledged the Economic Research Service to help in whatever way we can in conducting regional outlook conferences.

Our firm desire is to make the National Outlook Conference as useful as possible to Extension economists and to all who choose to join us in these discussions. I welcome suggestions of ways to improve it.