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***“WHAT IS AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS?”***

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*Compiled by*

*Larry G. Hamm, President NAAEA*



## REINVENTING AN UNDERSTANDING OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS: A FOCUS ON RESEARCH \*

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I am pleased for the opportunity to contribute to this discussion of "Reinventing an Understanding of Ag Economics." The challenges in this regard were well established by Brady Deaton, Larry Connor and Dan Bromley in their earlier remarks. As Larry Hamm requested in his invitation for this session, I will bring an AAEA perspective to the reinventing challenge and identify ways in which AAEA has helped or could in the future.

I begin my thoughts with the acknowledgment that we have a real issue here. It is certainly true that the rest of the world out there does not understand what agricultural economics is and they are not inclined to search for better information. It is our obligation to create this understanding among our various customers or users of applied economics. Included, of course, are graduate and undergraduate students, users of the research or extension product generated by ag economists, and even deans, department chairs and other academics within colleges of agriculture. We have to assume that these people would somehow be better off if they understood the field of agricultural economics and through their understanding we are made better off as well.

Some have a basic problem with our parent discipline. Economics and other social sciences are too often misunderstood or ignored in a multidisciplinary setting. When we add the modifier "agricultural" we lose any residual understanding of economics itself. Now people are really confused! How many times have you struggled to explain your profession to the person next to you on the plane, or at a party? It isn't easy! Many departments have changed their names in the attempt to convey a more accurate message of what they are up to or to better communicate with their customers.

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\* Comments for a panel session, National Association of Agricultural Economics Administrators Workshop, November 2, 1996.



The theme of this session is reinventing. That is a verb, implying action. I will make four major points about the research aspect of agricultural economics and the role of AAEA in this reinventions. Obviously, the research mission of a land grant university is to work on problems that matter to someone. The challenge then is to select the appropriate problems, get the funds, do the work and most importantly communicate the results to those whose problems led to the research. I would assert up front that the research we do is eminently worthwhile but too few people know about it. We have to make our work digestible, and some out there simply do not understand how economic analysis can make a difference to them. AAEA can do some things that individual departments of agricultural economics cannot.

First, AAEA joined the Farm Foundation, C-FARE and the Social Science Subcommittee of ESCOP in sponsoring a workshop on measuring the results and consequences of research and making those results understandable and usable in the policy process. The purpose of this conference was to bring researchers and users of research results together to discuss common needs. It was a very useful workshop. Perhaps the next step would be to concentrate on a particular area of research, such as natural resources and the environment, and provide more depth for legislative and agency staff than was possible in this initial workshop. AAEA can host or help organize other targeted workshops that are subject matter or region specific. The purpose, again, would be to help our potential customers understand how results of economic analysis can actually be used in national, state or local policy.

Secondly, we ag economists must develop and sustain a visible presence in Washington D.C. This is absolutely crucial. Other professions and disciplines have been in Washington for many years but we have not, at least in any organized way. There is a demand for information that ag economists can provide. We must be in a position to assemble appropriate research results and mobilize the researchers themselves when the information need exists. We do have C-FARE in Washington now. C-FARE is really the action wing of the agricultural economics profession. AAEA and the National Association of Agricultural Economics Administrators are members of C-FARE. Working with staff of the Coalition of Social Science Associations in Washington, we have prepared and delivered testimony for congressional budget subcommittees on the importance of social science research. AAEA represents a substantial pool of talent that could be directed to meeting information needs as they occur in Washington. Through C-FARE, or even the AAEA business office, we should be able



to mobilize our talent when needed and find experts willing to help through expert testimony when key decisions are being made.

Thirdly, AAEA can collaborate with other scientific associations both within agriculture and outside. We need to be available as social scientists to work with our sister disciplines. We need to help them understand where applied economics research fits. A few examples: The National Research Council and the National Academy of Sciences Board on Agriculture holds an annual meeting of professional associations and has recently conducted a project on the future of the land grant universities. AAEA must maintain an active partnership with NAS on various panels and projects in which they are engaged. Many individual ag economists have served on expert panels. AAEA executive board member Susan Offutt is staff director for the Board on Agriculture. Another example: AAEA is now a member of the Council of Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST). We participated in a recent meeting organized by CAST to examine the role of professional associations in meeting the needs of their members and thereby the agricultural professions. AAEA has recently become an affiliate member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). We are part of the social, economic and behavioral science panel of AAAS. In this capacity, we can help shape the agenda for the annual meeting, participate in selected panels and in other ways bring applied economics to the table with other scientific disciplines. AAEA is participating with other scientific associations in the Agricultural Research Institute Coalition on Information Technology. A workshop is planned by this coalition in March in Beltsville, with active involvement by AAEA members. We have worked hard to find ways to hold joint annual meetings with other professional associations as another way to improve communication among professional associations. We met jointly with the Soil and Water Conservation Society in Baltimore in 1992. The Southern Association of Agricultural Sciences suggests a structure by which the various agricultural disciplines could come together on themes of mutual interest. The SAAS meetings do not really accomplish much integration of the disciplines, but they could. We in AAEA have made several attempts to meet jointly with the Rural Sociology Society, but so far without success. There are always difficult logistical problems in bringing two large organizations together for their annual meetings.

Finally, I would like to see AAEA and our profession in general develop an internship or fellowship



program in Washington where we could place an agricultural economist, probably a young faculty member, for a year with the House Ag Committee, Committee on Public Works, CSREES or some other appropriate agency in Washington. Other organizations have these intern programs. The Soil Science Society, Agronomy Society and Crop Science Society have an excellent congressional fellow program where a young professional serves a year with an appropriate congressional office in Washington. Terry Nipp, our key lobbyist for National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, among other groups, is a graduate of that program. Perhaps AAEEA should join with the tri-societies in some way for the fellows program. In my view, such an internship would be a great opportunity for ag economists. It would serve our profession well and also educate the host agency or office on what difference applied economics can make to them. The individual involved would gain valuable insights on how to make their work useful in a policy setting. These internships can be expensive and we need to be innovative in finding ways to fund them.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts on reinventing an understanding of agricultural economics research and possible roles for our professional association in that process.