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PROCEEDINGS OF A SYMPOSIUM
ON
REGIONAL RESEARCH: LESSONS FOR
A GLOBAL RESEARCH AGENDA



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LESSONS FROM REGIONAL RESEARCH FOR A GLOBAL RESEARCH AGENDA: DISCUSSION

Donald E. Anderson¹²

The productivity of early regional research efforts is well documented by a North Central regional publication titled, "Regional Research: Lessons from North Central Dairy Marketing Researchers." This publication clearly identifies the success of regional research through the interaction of scientists in the development of unique techniques and the concentration of resources on specific issues generating timely results to researchable problems. It is generally agreed among land grant scientists that the mental stimulation generated by regional research committees has resulted in effective problem identification and research project execution. The degree of success, however, varies greatly depending on leadership and the degree of commitment by committee members. I think much of the success of the North Central regional dairy marketing committees can be traced to the strong leadership of key members and a significant commitment by a majority of the membership throughout the years. Not all regional research committees have exhibited this strong track record on a sustained basis. The renaissance of regional and national projects of the regional system may lie in the globalization as is being suggested here today.

Dr. Graf has done an excellent job of documenting the chronological change of the dairy industry and has suggested major contributions that regional research has made to assist the industry in operational and policy decisions. I am familiar with the policy role of Dr. Graf and others having served on the Land O' Lakes policy committee for the past several years. It would be my assessment that a major share of the research that Dr. Graf cites was both timely and relevant to industry needs and that the regional structure aided greatly in bringing major research issues into focus.

Dr. McBride also supports the strong need for the regional research approach to avoid duplication of effort and to bring focus to marketing problems which were regional and national in scope. The four changes in the dairy industry cited by Dr. McBride could be appropriately expanded to include changing consumer taste and preferences as being a major market force in the U.S. dairy market.

I agree with Dr. French that the regional research model is an excellent mentoring process for both the young professional as well as a significant refreshment course for both the young professional as well as a significant refreshment course for the older scientist. I believe that the regional experience has led to vastly improved communications among Land Grant institutions as well as greater communications between states and federal research

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organizations. I am pleased to see greater participation in regional and national research projects by USDA agencies.

There appears to be commitment to more joint research efforts between the SAES system and USDA agencies. This, I believe, is a healthy trend that will lead to stronger regional and national research efforts. This accomplishment alone is ample justification for maintenance of the system. The statement that Dr. French makes regarding the learning process for administrators is indeed true. I look forward to meeting with regional committees because of the professional refreshment it offers as a means of keeping touch with one's professional home. I agree that the regional experience has contributed greatly to the teaching skills of many young scientists, but I also submit that the research output by some regional committees has marked the way for the regional and national research agenda in many disciplines. As we move to a more global research focus, I believe national research committees will set the agenda for many new research thrusts in the decades ahead. To that end the Committee of Nine has developed a funding mechanism to facilitate the bringing together of groups of scientists to develop a national research agenda.

Dr. Baumer's paper has documented the significant accomplishments of the North Central dairy marketing research committees. I fully agree with his conclusions that the regional program has greatly enhanced the efficiency of the Land Grant research system and I fully agree that the product of the regional research program should be given equal stature to publication in other professional outlets. I think this could be expanded into a major challenge to professional associations to develop a method to afford significant peer recognition for contributions to regional publications. A challenge that I would extend to this group is to lead the way in developing a peer process that provides greater professional recognition to contributions to regional research projects. The growing emphasis on increased rigor in promotion and tenure criteria at all of our institutions poses a real threat to the quality of regional, national and future global research efforts. You as designers of future evaluation criteria must create methods to preserve the integrity of regional research if we are to avoid throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Drs. Farris and Robinson have done a masterful job of reviewing the genesis of the regional research program. I fully agree that many of the research projects we call regional are really national in scope and focus on global issues particularly as they focus on issues relating to international trade policy and leading - edge science in the biological sciences. For example, the North Central regional oats breeding committee recently met in Europe with the travel being underwritten by a private firm. This points to the need for global communication if our research programs are to be maintained on at a state-of-the-art plane. The Land Grant system has been slow to support national and global research efforts. This fact is evidenced by the meager level of support for off-the-top funding for interregional research that has evolved over the past several decades.

I fully agree that the time is right for the evaluation of an International Cooperative Research (ICR) program. I would further suggest that the development of the new National

Research Initiative funding the markets, trade and policy area with U.S. House and Senate recommendation of 4 million dollars of competitive funding during Fiscal '92 places this area of research on the same playing field as global climate change and other major national issues. There is no doubt that the time is right for the economics profession to focus major national and international research thrusts on issues of high priority in the perception of the general public. The competitive position of the U.S. in world markets has clearly emerged as a major national concern that will require focus by the economics profession to bring significant new resources to bear on the researchable issues in the area.

I have had the opportunity to serve on the Committee of Nine that provides operational and policy input to the U.S. Department of Agriculture on the management and operation of regional research. I am pleased to say that the Committee of Nine has created a new institutional framework to encourage national research efforts in high priority research areas. The new national research projects and national research service projects were created to allow for off-the-top funding for new high priority research program areas. The mechanism for funding requires three of the four regional directors associations to approve the project before off-the-top funding can be assigned to the project. This requires a strong consensus among the experiment station directors and a good understanding of the importance of the research area being proposed.

What does this mean to our profession? I think there may be three basic rules to follow and they are: 1) focus on a clearly defined research topic; 2) focus in a highly visible public issue and; 3) focus on a program that is achievable in a reasonable time frame. I have chosen the term focus with an objective in mind in that it is my perception that agricultural economists and other social scientists have come together in various settings in recent time and developed what appears to me to be unabridged shopping lists of research topics with lack of focus on key high priority issues.

Experience would teach us that a shotgun approach of something for everyone doesn't generate much support in the appropriation process in congress or among regional association directors. If one examines successful funding efforts of other disciplines we see water quality, global warming, and biotechnology heading the hit parade. All of these areas are clearly focused identifying researchable topics that have high national concern. We should take a lesson from our colleagues in the biological and physical sciences and sharpen the focus on a major key economic issue and focus our collective efforts on gaining support for increased research and education in that area.

In conclusion, I believe the window of opportunity is here for agricultural economists to play a more prominent role in competitive research funding. The concerns about international competitiveness and the economic transition of Eastern Europe are two key issues that warrant consideration for inclusion in our agenda in the near term. The real challenge is to articulate a research agenda on a well focused research topic and communicate the need for resources to implement the program to key program planners in the Land Grant system. I am confident that new national and international research

projects will be developed in the regional project system and that large global research efforts with greater fiscal support will evolve in the next decade.

LESSONS FROM REGIONAL RESEARCH FOR A GLOBAL RESEARCH AGENDA: DISCUSSION

T.H. Klindt¹³

We have heard a well orchestrated set of papers here this afternoon. They included an historical outline of the need for and development of regional research. An example of successful regional research was discussed, together with an elaboration of the characteristics which led to its success and an outline of direct and indirect benefits. Parallels were then drawn between circumstances which led to the creation of regional research and the current situation with regard to global research. Finally, the conclusion was drawn that the regional research format could be beneficially used to enhance global research. Given an assumption that the content and progression of the presentations were directed toward that conclusion, discussion remarks are similarly directed.

One observation should be made at the outset. The notion of global research appeared to take two different forms in the presentations. One was cooperative global research wherein a roster of participants would be distinctly international. One might suppose that the research undertaken would be of common interest among participant nations, as there is common interest among participant states in the case of regional research. The second may be found in Drs. Robinson and Farris' presentation in which they discuss funds earmarked for "research that contributes to improving the competitive position of U.S. agriculture and agribusiness in global markets." Both of the implied research agendas are eminently worthwhile. They are also quite different not only in subject matter but also in terms of funding potential and the ease with which they might be accommodated within a particular research administration mechanism. Perhaps both research agendas are proposed for consideration under a regional research type format.

If the goal is to conduct research to improve the U.S. position in the global economy, then the mechanism of regional research is already in place. Indeed, regional committees currently exist to conduct research in this area. All that remains to enhance this effort is to convince those who administer research budgets that the issue is of sufficiently high priority to demand better funding. Of course, the above begs the question of whether the regional research format is the most effective mechanism under which to conduct the research.

The dairy marketing project was a very productive, long-term research effort. The implication appeared to be that if dairy research could be successfully undertaken under the regional research format, then similar success could be obtained if the format were used to address a global research agenda. One might contend, however, that a successful example does not establish the general efficacy of the regional format. Indeed, anyone who has

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served as an administrative advisor for a few years can cite cases of well-conceived and well-intentioned regional research that did not work well. The mechanism itself is no panacea.

The Southern Experiment Station Directors' Association has commissioned an ad hoc committee to study regional research procedures in an effort to find ways of enhancing productivity. Two problems seem common. One is an absence of true regionality in some research projects. Instead, the projects are a combination of related but otherwise unconnected individual state projects. In these cases, the regional research mechanism is simply excess and expensive baggage. A second problem is one of free riders in the cooperative venture. There is a tendency to attribute to each participant scientist approximately the average rather than incremental output. All is well so long as all participants are productive and there exists the hoped-for synergism. However, when only a few scientists carry much of the workload, these folks often find reason to cease participation. A corollary to Gresham's Law seems to obtain; free riding (read unproductive) scientists run off productive scientists. It remains to be seen if means will be found to address these chronic problems. In brief, the regional research model can work very well in addressing issues which call for input from a broad array of institutions. However, when the conditions are not right, it can be a very lethargic vehicle.

The character of regional research is derived in large measure from its unique funding. Each Experiment Station receives resources which must be used for regional research or not used at all. Under these circumstances one should not be surprised that Experiment Stations support such research and are able to cooperate; each has a quantity of earmarked dollars to expend for the purpose. If the intent is to conduct research in the U.S. interest, then the traditional mechanism is in place. If it is to conduct cooperative global research, I have not seen plans for each country to have similarly earmarked dollars. The point here is that if the funding mechanism is different, the character of cooperative research would likely be different.

In summary, the notion of recognizing the global economy and expanding agricultural research accordingly is a good one. Indeed, there would be benefit in research at the U.S. interest level and the global interest level. My only suggestion is that we take a hard look at the research mechanism to be used to assure that we have done all that we can to enhance the probability of success. After such an examination, we may or may not find that the regional research format is the one to use. But in any event, it should not slow efforts to bring research to bear on the subject-matter area.