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FUTURE OF POLICY RESEARCH: THE PRACTITIONER VIEWPOINT

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Public policy for agriculture is by definition the result of a group deliberative process. . . and research on issues of public policy is of real value only in its ultimate application in this process. Clearly, if we cannot make the case that our policy research is contributing in a positive fashion to the decision making process, we cannot defend the expenditure of public funds in support of it!

While basic theoretical work is certainly necessary to undergird our policy research base and the education of those who might affect or be affected by agricultural policies is essential, the policy decision making process itself has a very significant time dimension associated with it. Just as Extension educators deal with the so-called "teachable" moment, those dealing in policy must be aware of the "useable" moment.

As with most areas of economic research, agricultural policy research occurs along a continuum—ranging from the highly theoretical to the highly applied. The kinds of research that occur along this continuum are very much interrelated and mutually-supportive . . . the applied cannot stand for long without the theoretical or the detailed empirical and vice-versa. The common denominator throughout tends to be a basic understanding of how the agricultural economy and its component parts behave. Policy research focuses on the effects that publicly mandated changes in market institutions might have on resource use and returns within the farm sector.

Moreover, given that society holds particular objectives in setting its policies, it also involves assessing the likelihood of those objectives being attained. To gain an understanding of the relevant behavioral relationships requires the most thoughtful insights of the theoretician as well as the basic instincts of the practitioner. Neither can stand alone for very long.

Through policy research we build the capital upon which both the educators and the analysts among us must draw. Educators distill the essence of the research base and package it to meet the needs of their various client groups. Extension educators, for instance, deliver such information through a variety of forums—e.g., public meetings, Extension Service publications, written mass media, radio, and TV. Usually, adequate time is available for review of pertinent research materials. Classroom educators can draw more directly on the published research itself.

Policy analysts fill a somewhat different role and must respond to a rather different set of pressures. As noted above, policy decision making involves a "useable" moment. In some cases, preparation time is available; but in other instances the analyst must simply react. As a consequence, those operating most closely to decision makers are often dependent upon personal knowledge, access to experts, or information in their files. Some analysts also enjoy access to analytical systems (e.g., formal data banks, econometric models, and so forth) that extend their knowledge in particular situations. For better or worse, however, it is often

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these analysts, closest to the decision makers that have the least time to update or extend their information bases.

It is my contention that all those who operate at points along the policy research continuum have a responsibility to see that their results are useable. By this I do not mean to suggest that all policy researchers should become practitioners. Rather, I am suggesting that some amount of effort must be given to interpreting and synthesizing research findings into useable and more quickly understood formats. At a minimum, greater care should be taken to draw out the policy implications of what otherwise might be a rather obscure set of findings. Alternative outlets (e.g., Policy Research Notes) should be explored to provide a summary look at the essence of rather long and detailed research reports.

While some observers might argue that any economist "worth his or her salt" will search out the essence of various research writings, I think it is also fair to observe that any researcher who truly understands the issues at hand should be able to explain them in terms that are easily and quickly understood by technical and nontechnical audiences alike.

At issue here, really, is the transmission of information along the policy research continuum. Practitioners must constantly be on the look-out for new ideas and more refined explanations of behavior within the farm sector. Those dealing with the theoretical and the more detailed empirical aspects of the research continuum should look to the practitioner for aid in problem definition and understanding of the information needs of policy decision makers. Policy research is, after all, of true value only in its ultimate application. Unless all researchers pull together to provide the best possible information within the "useable" moment, decision makers could learn to do without the benefits of such input.