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ON THE COMMUNICATION OF POLICY RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS RESULTS TO POLICY MAKERS: A WRAPUP

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I commend the conference planning committee for providing this forum to discuss the "ways and means" of communicating policy research results to policy makers. The workshop had a formal structure but the tone has been pleasantly informal. Ideas have been freely exchanged; differing viewpoints have been voiced; and we all have been challenged to reevaluate our approaches to problem selection, analysis, and communication of results of policy research.

My comments will focus on two central questions considered by the workshop: How can policy researchers interject policy research and analysis results into the policy making process and; in what manner should results be communicated? First, I will summarize selected observations from the last two and one half days. Then I will make some additional comments that are of a more general nature.

Parenthetically, I might mention that I have been doing policy research long enough to have encountered and to have learned to accept, perhaps, the single "truth" or unequivocal statement of fact that has come from the conference: "Do not take your policy research and/or analysis too seriously, because the policy makers sure as heck won't." This is, of course, somewhat of an overstatement. Yet, it does suggest that we need to be ever cognizant of disparity between what a policy researcher and policy maker may perceive as relevant research results.

CONFERENCE SYNOPSIS

As I listened to participants of this conference, I noted we were being advised to observe the five W's taught in first semester journalism courses — Who, What, When, Where, and Why.

The What

What are the policy issues that need to be researched? Speakers addressing specific research areas outlined researchable issues for their respective areas. But comments were also made concerning issue identification in general. Mayer, Farrell, Spitze, Vertrees, Zellner and others suggested that we regularly communicate with our state's Congresspersons and Senators — especially their staffs — and with leaders of commodity and farm organizations within our respective states. But preferably we should "immerse ourselves" in the policy making process by spending a year or more in Washington, D.C. to observe first hand the types of policy questions and issues that are of concern to policy makers and to observe the various policy frameworks that deal with those policy issues.

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The Why

Along with the "what" question is why is a given researchable policy problem of concern and exactly to whom is it of concern? Why is it a relevant policy problem and for how long will it be relevant?

After the problem has been identified, research methodology developed, and analysis completed, the question, which was the central theme of the workshop, is how do we effectively communicate the results to the policy maker? This brings us to the where, when, who and, of course, how.

The Where

The usual "wheres" or research dissemination outlets for agricultural economists such as journals, experiment station series, USDA publications, 300 page monographs, etc., are out. Based on what has been said, it would appear that a single page of stationery may be the best written communication device. But whether its length is one, two, or at most five pages, the summary of results must be concise, well-written and understandable to the noneconomist; (The traditional more lengthy publications will, of course, still be available on request to those interested.)

The When

As Farrell and others pointed out, the timing of policy analysis and its communication are very important. The researcher needs to be aware of when an issue becomes ripe for political attention and when it is being actively considered by the staffs of policy makers. It is during this latter time, but probably before public hearings on the issue, that the researcher has the highest probability of getting the attention of the staff people and decision makers. A little good luck is also helpful in gauging the teachable moment. Ideally multiple interaction or interchange takes place between decision maker and policy analyst from the time of problem identification through reporting of the results.

The Who

A number of participants discussed various policy pressure points that can be considered to get policy results into the policy decision making process. One approach is to work with our respective state commodity or farm organizations and let them carry the results to the national level. Senators, Congresspersons and their staffs from our home states are other entry points.

The food and agricultural staffs of policy makers in D.C. may provide the most direct and effective link to policy makers. Preferably the food policy staffs of all the following should be considered: Senate and House Agricultural Committees, Congressional Budget Office, White House, USDA, Council of Economic Advisors, Library of Congress, Departments of State and Treasury and Office of Management and Budget.

The How

Now, aside from keeping written communications short and to the point, how should a researcher communicate with all these people? What should he/she include in his/her short write-up of policy research results?

Each agency has a specialized, sometimes even univariate, interest in the results. For example, the Office of Management and Budget will want to know the extent of budget exposure. The State Department will want to know effects on trade and on U. S. interests in the world community. Those on the Hill and in the USDA and the CEA will be interested in the effects on farm prices and incomes, food prices, distribution of benefits and losses, as well as treasury costs and international considerations.

In short, the brief research summary should be tailored to the interests of the agency or decision maker with which the researcher is trying to communicate. Different summaries of a given policy analysis may be needed for the various results users, with easily understood, but perhaps different, figures or graphs for each version.

Other Summary Points

- Policy makers want results interrupted in light of the existing economic environment, i.e., do not assume the problem away.
- Shape and package research results in a way that is credible to policy makers.
- Tradeoffs should be pointed out explicitly in reporting research results.
- Cost and benefit estimates should be stated in a manner that is understandable and meaningful to policy makers.
- Analytical frameworks need to be developed that better account for multiple policy objectives.
- Researchers can often help policy makers identify alternative policy objectives as well as assess consequences of specified policies.
- Policy changes in an evolutionary manner rather than abruptly.
- The need to present analysis results in a simple, concise and understandable form does not necessarily imply the use of simple techniques in the research or analysis phase.

SOME RANDOM PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

Policy analyses without the use of formal empirical models are criticized as "back of the envelop" techniques. Analytical models that are relatively small and therefore easy to use and manipulate are chastised for not including, or making endogenous, the domestic and international influences of related agricultural sectors and nonagricultural variables. A sophisticated and highly endogenized model is dismissed as being too complex. We all need to do the best we can to provide objective analyses, acknowledge the limitations of our approaches, and openly consider alternative analysis techniques. As my father so often says, "Only those who do nothing escape criticism."

Policy Analysis as an Iterative Process

I have been involved for a number of years in developing analytical techniques for use in policy analysis. Much of the research on model development has been done in accordance with the needs and suggestions of analysts who use the model. The analysts in turn interact with policy makers in the analyses of alternative programs. This interaction between researchers out in the Land Grant System and D.C. analysts has been, I believe, a fruitful relationship. The iterative approach requires an ongoing commitment to support the modeling system. Some additional planning is also required at the early stages of model development.

Model Flexibility as a Matter of Design

To be of most use to policy makers, rerunning of models to consider a different set of policy parameters should be routine. I mention this rather obvious point because I, and I'm sure each of you, know of a number of models that were specified, tested and used to address a particular policy question, usually a hypothesis in a Ph.D., dissertation, and never used again.

Information for Stochastic Analyses

At one point in the conference there was some discussion about the marginal value of

supplying empirical frequency distributions as well as point estimates to policy makers; that is, the use of stochastic rather than deterministic simulation methods. By using stochastic methods, variability in the agricultural sector due to (primarily weather induced) variation in exports and domestic yields can be explicitly captured and reflected by model results.

The comment was made that little information is conveyed to policy makers by informing them that deficiency payments for both policy X and policy Y could be as low as zero or as high as \$8 billion or that the price of corn could range from \$2 to \$6 a bushel. Obviously, policy makers can come up with those ranges without seeking the counsel of modelers. But if the same set of analyses showed that with policy X there is a 90 percent probability that total government payments will be between \$2 and \$4.5 billion and between \$2.5 and \$3 billion with policy Y, it seems to me such information should be of value to the decision maker. Farm management researchers and extension personnel have been effectively using and communicating stochastic (firm-level) simulation results to individual farmers for a number of years now. Surely, we can figure out a credible way to communicate similar information to well-educated and well-informed policy makers.

Criterion Functions and Positive Economics

Objective functions or criterion functions have been mentioned several times over the last two and a half days in number of contexts. I, for one, am pleased about that. I know talk of objective functions and control techniques make many analysts uncomfortable. On the surface it may seem that the researcher, by defining the weights for the criterion function, is claiming divine knowledge of what is "good" for society. But it is especially important to distinguish the research and analysis phases of control applications.

In the research phase the basic model development includes a whole host of activities, one of which is inserting a reasonable criterion function for purposes of testing the overall approach. The researcher may make arguments concerning the validity of a specified criterion function, but in fact he concocts it. But that is only the research phase. In the analysis phase, weights for the criterion function are not provided by the analyst but are revealed by the policy maker by his reaction to the results from running and rerunning the model with various weighting schemes.

Given that food and agricultural policy makers within each area of government have certain objectives in mind, we might as well employ, as appropriate, analytical techniques that provide the type of policy analysis support policy makers need. With the usual caveats, we should be able to tell a policy maker the levels of specified policy instruments that would be required to meet his objective of most efficiently using, let's say as a hypothetical example, \$1 billion to affect positively net farm income without raising the farm-value portion of food costs more than 2 percent.

Fulfilling such a request from a policy maker should not offend even the most faithful adherent to the canons of positivistic economic analysis. Control techniques provide the most efficient analytical device to do the job.