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**FUTURE PRIORITIES AND AGENDA FOR
FARM MANAGEMENT RESEARCH:
A CASE STUDY OF A CONFERENCE IN THE USA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the background, development, content, successes, short comings, and possible sequel of a national farm management research conference recently held in the United States of America. The paper offers two benefits to the international farm management community. First, is an awareness of the conference and of the availability of conference proceedings. Second, is provision of a model that may be used and improved upon by farm management specialists in other countries who may wish to organise a similar conference. The conference included ten presented papers, discussions of those papers, a panel of two agricultural industry leaders, group discussions, and concluding comments. Possible improvements on a second conference include involvement of professional farm managers, more small group discussion, efforts to reach consensus on specific future priorities and agenda, and scheduled time for participants to specify and share their individual future priorities and agenda.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the background, development, content, successes, shortcomings, and possible sequel of a national conference that was recently held in the United States of America (USA). Organised by the North Central Regional Research Committee titled, "Farm and Financial Management" (NCR-113), the conference was titled, "Future Priorities and Agenda for Farm Management Research." This paper focuses on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the conference.

The paper offers two benefits to the international farm management community. First, is an awareness of the conference and of the availability of conference proceedings. Second, is provision of a model that may be used and improved upon by farm management specialists in other countries who may wish to organise a similar conference. But first some background information, about the farm management committee and farm management situation that spawned the conference.

BACKGROUND

Production Agriculture in the USA has been characterized by change. Long-term trends include decreasing farm numbers and increasing commercial farm size. Traditional farm management research often consisted of measuring the income potential of alternative enterprises and seeking a profit-maximizing combination of enterprises. As the number of farms has decreased both in numerical terms and relative to other populations, the importance and priority of traditional farm management research has declined. Research issues related to farm management that have increased in importance include conservation of natural resources such as soil and water, food safety, and vertical coordination with farm input and food processing industries.

In this changing environment for production agriculture there is an ongoing and urgent need for farm management researchers to meet and discuss research issues. One forum for such interactions in the USA is regional research committees. Land-grant universities in the USA are located in one of four geographical regions-- Western, North Central, Southern, and Northeastern. These committees are organised regionally; but they often address national as well as regional issues. They also may

have participants from outside the region. For example, NCR-113, the committee that organised the conference discussed in this paper, had, in addition to participants from the North Central region, a participant from the state of New York, which is in the Northeastern region, and a participant from the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

DEVELOPMENT

At the annual meeting in October 1991, the members of NCR-113 decided to conduct a national conference on the topic, "Futures Priorities and Agenda for Farm Management Research." A conference coordinating committee was appointed that consisted of Robert Burton, Jr., Chair, Kansas State University; George Casler, Cornell University; Stephen Harsh, Michigan State University; Glenn Helmers, University of Nebraska; and David Watt, North Dakota State University. Cornell University is located in the Northeastern region. In order to ensure a national scope for the conference, two members who were not participating in NCR-113 were added. These were Harold Carter, University of California-Davis (Western region) and Thomas Knight, Texas A&M University (Southern region).

Starting with a list of topics that was suggested at the October 1991 NCR-113 meeting, the coordinating committee held a teleconference in December 1991. Topics were specified and authors suggested to write and present papers. The date of the conference was set for May 16-18, 1993, a time of year when most universities in the USA would not have formal classes in session. St. Louis, Missouri was selected as the location for the conference. St. Louis is centrally located in the USA and is easily accessible by both air and car.

An important process that contributed to the quality of individual papers and to the conference as a whole was review of papers by NCR-113 members. With the exception of one paper that was added late in the process, authors of papers were asked to submit paper drafts by September 1, 1992. Two reviewers were assigned to review each paper. The purpose of these reviews was to ensure appropriate content of the conference and of individual papers, to aid in selection of discussants of the papers, and to improve the quality of the papers. These reviews were to be completed prior to the October 1992 meeting of NCR-113.

Asking presenters to submit their papers early for review had payoffs in contributing to the purposes of the reviews mentioned above. However, there were some problems. Some of the authors were not able to write their papers in time for review before the October 1992 NCR-113 meeting. So in some cases reviewers were reviewing paper outlines instead of written papers. Also, some of the reviewers were not able to complete their reviews.

However, the early submission and review process was very helpful in providing background for conference planning at the October 1992 NCR-113 meeting. At this meeting the papers were discussed, potential discussants of the papers were identified, a panel of farmer/agricultural leaders was added to the conference, and the conference schedule was specified.

Communications with speakers, discussants, and others on the program were very important. The general procedure was to telephone each, and then to send a formal written invitation. For all speakers and discussants a written acceptance of the responsibility was requested. Also, after the October 1992 meeting of NCR-113, drafts or outlines of almost all the papers were sent to all the authors. Extra efforts were required in some cases to try to ensure that papers were received by discussants in time for them to prepare their discussions.

Practically all of these communications were performed by the chair of the conference coordinating committee. This provided the advantage of having a central person and location for communications. However, it also resulted in a rather large and time-consuming responsibility for the Chair.

The chair of the conference coordinating committee was employed in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University (KSU). Two administrative units of KSU greatly contributed to the conference. University policy generally requires that faculty who are responsible for organising a conference use the KSU Conference Office. Use of the Conference Office was a tremendous help. The conference office provided a conference coordinator and other staff who were experienced in organising conferences, publicity, budgeting, handling funds, registration procedures, and communicating with the conference facility. Of course, the conference office had to be paid for providing these essential services.

The other administrative unit was the KSU Department of Agricultural

Economics (DAE). Use of the KSU Conference Office required an on-campus sponsoring department. The head of the DAE allowed the Department to be the on-campus sponsor and also agreed to allow the chair of the conference coordinating committee to serve as chair and to use his secretary and other departmental resources in planning and implementing the conference.

FUNDING

One of the reasons an on-campus sponsor is required for using the KSU Conference Office is that the on-campus sponsor is committed to pay any loss if the costs of the conference exceed available funds. Initially the only funds available were funds to be generated by registration fees of participants.

Several potential sources of outside funding were considered and a few were pursued. An organisation called Farm Foundation agreed to fund the travel of the two members of the coordinating committee who were not members of NCR-113 to attend the October 1992 NCR-113 meeting. Farm Foundation also provided funding to help pay costs of the conference.

The conference funding provided by Farm Foundation was a tremendous help for two reasons. First, it was necessary to set a registration fee for the conference that would cover both the variable costs and fixed costs for each participant. At the time the registration fee needed to be set, conference planners did not know how many would participate. The moneys committed by Farm Foundation were enough to essentially cover the fixed costs of the conference and, therefore, removed the uncertainty associated with spreading fixed costs over an unknown number of participants. Second, funding provided by Farm Foundation lowered the registration fee and, therefore, probably increased the number of participants.

After the registration fee had been set the conference organisers learned that the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture had committed money to the conference as a part of a Farm Foundation/ERS Cooperative Agreement. These extra funds, that had not been expected, provided valuable flexibility. Ironically, at the time the conference was held, travel to the conference by an author employed by the ERS appeared to be impossible because of ERS's tight budget situation. So conference organisers were able to use these extra funds to pay

the travel expenses for an author from the ERS to attend. The extra unanticipated funding also allowed the printing of extra copies of the conference proceedings that were then distributed free-of-charge to university administrators and others who could potentially use them.

PUBLICITY

The target audience of the conference titled, "Future Priorities and Agenda for Farm Management Research," was researchers, teachers, extension workers, students and administrators who were interested in farm management. Most farm management researchers, etc. in the USA are employed in agricultural economics departments at land-grant universities and in government agencies. They would likely be members of the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA). Therefore, the major publicity about the conference included advertisements at professional meetings of agricultural economists and in the AAEA Newsletter. In addition, information about the conference and registration materials were mailed to agricultural economics department heads in the USA and to agricultural economists who were identified as farm management specialists.

The conference coordinating committee also communicated with regional extension farm management committees. As a result the North Central Extension Committee scheduled one of its meetings in St. Louis, so that its members could attend the conference without making an extra trip. The North Central Extension Committee also suggested potential discussants, some of whom were selected to discuss papers.

CONTENT

The conference program is shown in Appendix A. Two papers discussed the future of farm management research. One paper focused on priorities and agenda for farm management research in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Three papers discussed alternative views of the nature of farm management, such as farm management as a subdiscipline of economics; a business management perspective; and farm management as an integrative, interdisciplinary, problem solving science. Other papers addressed communication of farm management research results, skills

and training needed by farm management researchers, interdisciplinary research, and future financial support of farm management research. The conference also included discussions of papers, presentations by a panel of agricultural industry leaders, lively group discussions, and concluding remarks.

PROCEEDINGS

The conference proceedings included the ten presented papers, discussions of those papers, perspectives from the panel of agricultural industry leaders, summaries of two general discussion sessions, and concluding remarks. To enhance the usefulness of the proceedings the editors authored an executive summary and included conference evaluations and suggestions for future activities. In addition to current usefulness, these proceedings have future historical value as a record of much of the thinking of farm management economists in the USA in May of 1993.

As of early 1995 major categories of distribution of the proceedings were as follows. Copies had been sent to 92 registrants who received copies as part of their registration fee. Approximately 22 extra copies had been sold. Free copies had been distributed to 166 university and government administrators and others who might benefit. Seventy-six copies were available for sale. Free copies were available because of extra money provided by the Farm Foundation/ERS Cooperative Agreement. Copies were available for sale because income generated by registration fees was greater than the costs to be paid by these fees. Normally such profits are returned to the on-campus sponsoring department. DAE administrators agreed to use the profits to print extra copies of the proceedings that could then be sold.

SUCSESSES

A conference evaluation form was returned by 60 of the 95 participants. The general tone of the evaluations was very positive and indicated that participants were generally pleased with the conference. Presenters and discussants tended to be well prepared and most topics were considered relevant. Early planning and early submission and review of most of the papers likely contributed to these successes.

The interest in the conference was shown by the fact that almost twice as many people attended as had been planned for by the conference organisers. This was

especially significant because at the time the conference was held members of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service were generally not able to travel because of budget constraints.

SHORTCOMINGS

Various shortcomings and suggestions for improvement were noted in the evaluations. Two seem especially significant. First, some participants pointed out that the conference was a good start, but questioned where to go from here. For example, no consensus was reached as to what the future priorities and agenda for farm management research should be or even about the nature of farm management. Second, one participant noted that professional farm managers and the professional farm management society had been ignored.

Primarily because of the busy schedule of the senior editor, the proceedings were not published as soon after the conference as was desirable. The proceedings were completed in July 1994. In late summer 1994, copies were distributed to conference participants who had paid the registration fee. Distribution of most of the free copies occurred in early 1995. While the impact of the conference and conference proceedings is difficult to measure, it is likely that impact would have been greater if the proceedings had been published and distributed earlier.

SEQUELS

Possible activities for a second conference that would build on the one reported here include involvement of professional farm managers, more small group discussion, efforts to reach consensus on specific future priorities and agenda, and scheduled time for participants to specify and share their individual future priorities and agenda.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**APPENDIX A: CONFERENCE PROGRAM: "FUTURE PRIORITIES
AND AGENDA FOR FARM MANAGEMENT
RESEARCH"**

Sunday, May 16, 1993

6:30 - 8:30 p.m. Reception and Cash Bar
Registration Check-in

Monday, May 17, 1993

7:30 - 11:30 a.m. Registration Check-in

8:00 - 8:15 a.m. Master of Ceremonies, David L. Watt
Welcome, Robert O. Burton, Jr.

8:15 - 8:45 a.m. *Farm Management -- It's Potential Contributions to
Rural America in the Decade Ahead*, Glenn L. Johnson

8:45 - 8:55 a.m. Discussant, Arne Hallam

8:55 - 9:25 a.m. *Farm Management as a Subdiscipline of Economics
(Bioeconomics)*, Glenn A. Helmers and Miles J. Watts

9:25 - 9:55 a.m. *A Business Management Perspective on Farm
Management Research*, Steven C. Sonka and Danny A.
Klinefelter

9:55 - 10:10 a.m. Break

10:10 - 10:40 a.m. *Farm Management as an Integrative, Interdisciplinary,
Problem Solving Science*, Vernon R. Eidman

- 10:40 - 11:00 a.m. Discussant, Harold O. Carter
- 11:00 - 11:45 a.m. General Discussion, Moderator, David L. Watt;
Reporter, Robert H. Hornbaker
- 11:45 a.m. - 1:15 p.m. Conference Luncheon and Informal Discussions
- 1:15 - 2:45 p.m. Panel Discussion, *Future Priorities and Agenda for Farm Management Research: Perspectives from Agricultural Industry Leaders*, Panel: Elwood Kirkpatrick, President, Michigan Milk Producers Association; Gary Riedel, Past President, American Soybean Association. Introductions, Stephen B. Harsh; Moderator, Harlan Hughes; Reporter, Kenneth A. Foster
- 2:45 - 3:15 p.m. *Alliances with Faculty in Other Departments and Economists in Fields Other than Farm Management*, Stephen B. Harsh and J. Bruce Bullock
- 3:15 - 3:25 p.m. Discussant, George L. Casler
- 3:25 - 3:40 p.m. Break
- 3:40 - 4:10 p.m. *The Skills and Training Needed by Farm Management Researchers in the Future*, Loren W. Tauer
- 4:10 - 4:20 p.m. Discussant, Douglas R. Franklin
- 4:20 - 4:50 p.m. *Communication of Farm Management Research Results*, Thomas O. Knight
- 4:50 - 5:00 p.m. Discussant, George F. Patrick

5:00 p.m. Dinner groups and evening activities on your own

Tuesday, May 18, 1993

Master of Ceremonies, David L. Watt

8:30 - 9:00 a.m. *Priorities and Agenda for Farm Management Research in the U.S. Department of Agriculture*, Mary Ahearn and Katherine H. Reichelderfer

9:00 - 9:10 a.m. Discussant, Bernard F. Stanton

9:10 - 9:40 a.m. *Farm Management: the Road Ahead*, William G. Boggess and John Holt

9:40 - 9:50 a.m. Discussant, Ross O. Love

9:50 - 10:05 a.m. Break

10:05 - 10:35 a.m. *Future Financial Support for Farm Management Research*, R. Jim Hildreth and Gerald E. Klonglan

10:35 - 10:45 a.m. Discussant, Marc A. Johnson

10:45 - 11:30 a.m. General Discussion, Moderator, David L. Watt; Reporters, Larry L. Janssen and Burton Pflueger

11:30 - 11:45 a.m. Concluding Remarks, J. Bruce Bullock