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Accentuating the Positive

For a number of reasons—including concerns about the environment, health hazards and nutrition, quality and cost of food, and the availability of food for a hungry world—agriculture is getting more than its usual share of attention from environmental and consumer groups, government agencies, and the general public.

To be sure, a good deal of this recent surge of attention is unfriendly and from the uninformed, and some of it is in the form of rather high-pitched rhetoric, but in large measure it stems from sincere concerns and legitimate interests. And I believe this situation can be turned to our advantage. For too long, the agricultural community has complained that its contributions have not been appreciated, that it is taken for granted, and that its problems are not understood. And too often it has responded with a defensive posture to any criticism by non-agricultural sectors of society.

Often enough it has been said that agriculture has a poor image, that it talks to itself instead of delivering its message to the urban majority, and that it is the only major U.S. industry without an effective public relations program directed to the ultimate consumer. We have a story to tell—a factual, positive story of an industry that is indispensable to the welfare of every citizen. I submit that now is the time to get off the defensive and accentuate the positive!

If there is a message to be conveyed, there are advantages to being center stage rather than in the wings. You have the audience's attention. And while the limelight may reveal flaws, it will also reveal good performances. Agriculture's performance calls for applause rather than criticism; and now that we are getting some attention, we have the opportunity to tell the world about our accomplishments.

Because it is large and complex, agriculture is like the elephant being examined by blind men. The public's

concept of it may depend on the part of it with which they have had contact. We must accept the fact that environmentalism and consumerism are here to stay, and welcome the interest of a wide variety of previously uninterested individuals, organizations, and agencies.

When rising consumer prices result in declining real income for a significant proportion of the population, the consumer begins to examine more critically not only the products offered but also the operations of the producer of those products. The consumer of agricultural products—that is to say, the total population—forms opinions on pollution, energy use, nutrition, pesticides, export policies, and use of public land. And because agriculture is affected by what the consumer thinks about these matters as well as about food and fiber, it behooves us to take advantage of increased opportunities to develop *informed* opinions.

Public forums and hearings can provide opportunities to describe agriculture's actual contributions to the pollution problem and, without minimizing its seriousness, explain the economic and technological problems involved and emphasize the *positive* actions being taken by agriculture. Consumer representatives on commodity marketing boards and similar groups and agencies can be viewed not as a threat but as an opportunity to inform the consumer of the complex process, and the costs, of producing and protecting products of the quality and quantity demanded.

The consumer and the producer of agricultural products are wholly dependent on one another, and any improvement in their relationship will be beneficial to both. This improvement can only be achieved by expanded communication on a regular and continuing basis. If that can be accomplished it will be apparent that they have more in common than they have differences.