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Domestic issues affecting U.S. agriculture

Most program plans for agricultural research and education in colleges, universities, and federal agencies in the next decade and beyond seem to be based on how planners feel agriculture should be organized and ignore changing consumer demand and food dispensing patterns in this country.

If we continue to ignore what people want, what they are willing to pay for, and other factors in designing our agricultural plans, we could find agriculture in the same difficult situation that our automotive industry is in, with foreign competitors taking over much of our market.

Over 45 percent of the food consumed in the United States today is prepared and consumed outside the home. A significant amount of the food consumed in the home is processed by food handling firms in such a way that it fits into the lifestyle of American households with both husband and wife working or with single parents, who demand food that requires little time to prepare.

Another major influence on American agriculture is our ability to produce more than we need and to make it available for export. In 1980, our agricultural exports generated 47 billion dollars. Balancing this against our agricultural imports leaves a net gain of 29 billion dollars to apply to our unbalanced total foreign exchange activity. Our productive capacity is also important to our efforts to preserve world peace by alleviating starvation and hunger in poorly developed nations.

Domestically, we now expect to have a 365-day-a-year supply of such things as fresh lettuce, tomatoes, potatoes, beef, chicken, eggs, and milk, and we expect them to be available in large metropolitan areas, not just in the localities where they are produced. This contrasts sharply with agriculture existing when the Department of Agriculture and Land-Grant institutions were established.

Some groups in this country feel very strongly that the quality of rural American life depends on preserving the small, individually owned family farm. I have no quarrel with that concept in a social context. In fact, I believe that quality of life is related to the degree of independence, ingenuity, and freedom associated with small farmer-operated enterprises. I do not accept, however, that large-scale or industrialized agriculture automatically leads to

deterioration of the rural community. It can happen, but it need not happen.

We cannot ignore economic viability in our quest for quality living. Small businesses survive, because they usually provide a unique and desired service, or they sell something in high demand, or they are convenient, local sources of goods and services. The same characteristics apply to small agriculture. Specialty crops are usually small farm operations. There are no large plantations of avocados, or kiwis, or artichokes, or some of our top-quality wine grape varieties, or, in fact, most of our fruit and nut crops.

There are really two kinds of agriculture in this country — one based on satisfying a high and constant demand of basic food and fiber products, for both domestic and foreign consumption, and another that has a role, but not exclusively so, in the quality of rural life and in producing specialty products with a limited consumer demand but a favorable economic return.

We need to plan our agricultural extension, research, and education programs with this distinction in mind and not compromise our goals by trying to design a single comprehensive all-encompassing program.

When we address rural community well-being, it must be clearly understood that this issue is largely distinct and separable from the productive capacity of American agriculture. If we are careful to distinguish between the two roles of American agriculture, as a producer of food and fiber and as a basis for rural community well-being, it should be possible to design our teaching, research, extension, and governmental assistance programs to meet the needs of both.

Some of these activities could well be taken over by agro-industrial organizations. Businesses associated with agriculture could afford to participate increasingly in research and extension programs in which the benefits accrue not only to themselves but to their consuming customers. At the same time, our own programs in teaching, research, and extension need to be planned and conducted with an awareness of changing values in urban populations. We cannot nor should we ignore concerns about food safety, environmental quality, or increasing costs of the products of American agriculture.