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An ailing partnership?

In recent years, national planning and budget documents concerning agricultural research, extension, and educational program needs have made prominent reference to the federal-state "partnership." The most recent example is contained in the June 1982 Annual Report of the Joint Council on Trade and Agricultural Sciences to the Secretary of Agriculture.

In a general sense, I suppose, it is correct to identify this relationship as a partnership operating within a common system, because maintaining the health and vitality of agricultural productivity in the United States is a goal common to both federal and state programs. In a more pragmatic sense, however, I think the terminology implies a relationship that may not exist in practice and is unrealistic in theory under existing conditions. At best, the partnership more nearly resembles the rivalry between General Patton and Field Marshal Montgomery during World War II.

The term partnership denotes a cooperative enterprise based on joint rights and responsibilities. To succeed, such a relationship requires clearly stated objectives, specific roles of participation, mutually shared benefits, and an acceptable centralized authority to administer the cooperative arrangement. Such is not the case with agricultural research and extension activities in the United States, and to imply otherwise leads to misunderstanding, frustrations, and criticism of the "partners."

There are four principal participants in the enterprise serving the needs of U.S. agriculture. They are the private sector, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, state departments of agriculture, and state agricultural research and educational institutions. In theory, each has a unique role. The private sector supplies goods and services for profit; the federal government is a source of information, and both a source and an enforcer of laws, policies, and regulations that are of *national* agricultural concern; state departments of agriculture are sources and enforcers of policies and regulations of *state* agricultural concern; state research and educational institutions are sources of information used both locally and generally, and train people to

become active in all four of the participant groups.

These groups all need research information that supports their respective missions. Because the research needs and the constituency served by each are common to all, a systematic relationship has developed over time that more nearly resembles a federated alliance than a partnership. Information needed to support the mission of a specific group that is not readily available or quickly developed in one of the allied groups is often pursued independently by the group needing the information. In many instances this is appropriate, but too often a jurisdictional contest ensues to the detriment of the overall research and information program.

This drift into each other's sphere of primary responsibility, particularly in research programs, is cause for increasing confusion among private, federal, and state appropriating bodies as well as a cause of rising levels of competition and ill-feeling among the participants.

The positive accomplishments of the past suggest that we need not abandon the general concept of a partnership. To be equally effective in the future, however, we need to reexamine the perceived roles of each of the partners, recognize the value of their unique contributions and the degree of their justified autonomies, define the expectations of interrelatedness, and cease to contest with one another over disputed territories of research activities.

This is easier stated than accomplished, especially when what may be required will be a retrenchment on the part of some participants. However, the present state of our economy requires that overlapping missions be eliminated, that maximum efficiencies in the use of public monies be obtained, and that areas of responsibility be better defined. When one looks at what we expect from our agricultural system in the years ahead, it is clear that we are precariously underinvested in supporting services. To correct that deficiency we need to begin now to restore an ailing partnership to robust health or, better than that, to define and develop a new alliance for agricultural advances.