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The Winrock report

All of us in agricultural research and extension are justly proud of our accomplishments and will readily recite our long record of successes. We also tend to be very sensitive to any hint of criticism. We seem to feel that any questioning of our efforts implies that we are in disfavor or that we have failed in some way or that we aren't recognized as being an important element in the future of our scientific world.

I believe the opposite is true. The scientific knowledge and technology that has come from our institutions has caused consumers, government, and industry to count on our continued success. We shouldn't be surprised when these groups closely examine our structure and our future plans. They want to continue to enjoy the variety and quantity of foods that have been made available to them as a result of agricultural research in the past. We should welcome their questions and even their criticisms and look for opportunities to improve.

The report "Science for Agriculture," which summed up the results of the Winrock Conference held last summer, is a case in point. The purpose of that conference was to examine our preparedness to meet the research needs of the future. It looked at all of our present programs and funding systems and discussed ways we might improve these programs.

In some circles, however, the report is being interpreted as an attack on our research system. That view is intensified by the negative treatment the report has received in some of the scientific press. That is unfortunate, because as a participant in the Winrock Conference, I know that its purpose was intended to be positive and constructive.

I agree with the conclusion of the Winrock report that the formula funding system established by the Hatch Act should not be drastically altered, because it provides a financial basis for all state experiment stations.

It was also recommended that any real increase in research funding be made available to research organizations, including the Agricultural Research Service, state agricultural experiment stations, and non-land-grant universities, on a competitive basis. It is important to stress, however, that the intent was to include not only individual competitive grants, but competitive funding as well, to permit any individual or group of scientists or states to

develop a joint request for support of a single project.

Formula funding provides a base of continuous operation; competitive funding gives an opportunity for new directions and provides a dynamic system capable of change.

The Agricultural Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture is an essential component of the national agricultural research program, and its research programs should include basic science. The Winrock report did not suggest that ARS should do basic research to the exclusion of the rest of the national research system — only that strengthening basic research within ARS is essential. I believe all research programs need a component of basic, applied, development, and adaptive activities within them.

One of the most important recommendations to come out of the Winrock Conference dealt with the urgent need to expand the concept of "agricultural" research to encompass the total scientific community. Many of our most significant advances in recent years have resulted from work done in non-agricultural institutions. We need to recognize the role of all of science in agriculture, and to make better use of the brilliant minds and extensive facilities in non-land-grant institutions to help fill the gaps in our research programs.

As stated in the Winrock report:

"... the continued success of the agricultural research enterprise will depend upon its ability to retain the strongest elements of a system in existence for 120 years, while changing and adapting in response to new and ever-tougher challenges in agriculture [and] rapidly advancing scientific frontiers. . . ."

I invite my colleagues to join me in preparing for the future. I invite those who care about this great system to help chart a course of optimism and promise.