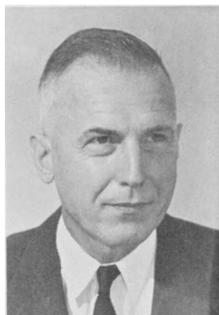


What's the Purpose of an Agricultural Experiment Station?



C. F. KELLY
Director, University
of California, Agri-
cultural Experiment
Station

THE CONSUMER is ultimately, and unquestionably, the chief beneficiary of the research of the Agricultural Experiment Station. Everyone eats and wears clothes (almost everyone), so the consumer is *all of us*.

For only 16½ per cent of our national average income, we can now purchase the best diet in the world. This is a result of having the most efficient food production, transportation, processing, and marketing system ever known—all possible through the obvious advantages of fine land and environment, plus organization, research, and hard work. Increasingly, farmers, processors, transportation workers, retailers, and wholesalers, are being organized into complex systems for producing and moving products from the land onto the tables of our homes.

However, the farmer—the foundation of these systems—is now in a position of declining importance. His share of the consumer's retail food dollar has dropped until it now averages only 39 cents, according to U. S. Department of Agriculture statistics (ranging from 19 cents for bakery and cereal products to 55 cents for poultry and eggs). While foods become better packaged, easier to prepare, more tasty, and more nutritious, the farmer's position in the nation's economy has declined. What should the Agricultural Experiment Station do to help the farmer, who at any given time is on a relatively lower economic level?

Should we direct our attention to helping him increase production for each acre? This does not seem an answer to the problem in this time of surplus food production in the United States. However, we cannot become so engrossed in the economic plight of the farmer today that we forget the much greater food needs expected 25 years from now.

Should we try to lower the cost of production (by means other than increasing the production per acre)? It does not seem that this would result in anything except a further decrease in the farmer's share of the consumer dollar.

Should we try to improve the farmer's position by research on mechanization

and farm management so that less labor will be needed? We are already being accused of putting people out of jobs. Would further mechanization help us compete with imported food production?

Should we content ourselves with trying to do away with drudgery on the farm—making life easier without trying to increase the income?

Should we even *try* to keep the family farm in business? Despite our corporate farm image, 97 per cent of California's farms are still not incorporated (of the 57,289 commercial farms in California, 1,673 are incorporated).

Should we just try to solve the day-to-day "crisis" type problems that never seem to end? Or should we put our greatest efforts into "basic research" to develop new knowledge for application by the farmers of A.D. 2000—when we expect additional food at any price will be needed? It should be remembered that the basic reason for our surpluses of food (and its low price at the farm fence) is the application since World War II of knowledge developed between 1880 and 1940.

Gains in farm productivity have been phenomenal in the last few decades. In 1900 one farm worker fed and clothed seven people. This ratio increased by 1920 to only eight, by 1940 to 11, by 1960 to 26, and by 1970 to 43. In other words, from 1900 to 1940 the number of persons supplied by one farm worker gained 54 per cent—but the number *doubled* (in half that time) during the next twenty years. We had a 64 per cent increase in the first seven years of the sixties. To repeat, should we increase our efforts in building up our "knowledge bank" for use in the next century? (Remember we are sometimes now accused of abandoning the practical, applied aspects of agricultural research).

There are many other viewpoints as to the real purpose for the existence of an Agricultural Experiment Station in these times of plenty (of food and fiber). What factors do you think should have the highest priority, and why? We would be pleased to hear your viewpoint.