

The Future of Public versus Private Research in Food and Agriculture

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Widespread interest in the future of agricultural research at our collegiate institutions continues as numerous reviews and reports, both national and international in scope, identify the priorities and kinds of future research needs. The issues being raised presently arise from concerns often expressed about who benefits from this research and the potential impacts on societal structure, environmental quality, and economic health; the appropriate role for public versus private research activity; the role of private funding of research in public institutions; the impact of the changing structure of U.S. agriculture on public and privately supported research; and the increasing cost of research.

While this list is illustrative, rather than inclusive, it does set the stage for a critical analysis by those of us responsible for administering agricultural research programs at collegiate institutions. Additional factors which will define the future for agricultural research in institutions are steady-state or declining student enrollments and the retirement in the late 1980s of agricultural research and teaching faculty members who entered our institutions after World War II.

In the face of these issues, it is not too early to plan for the structure of publicly supported agricultural research for the early part of the 21st century because decisions reached during the 1980s will largely define the program for the next 30 to 40 years. This assumes that the people who replace those retiring in the 1980s and 1990s will pursue their research interests for the lifetime of *their* careers. It is, therefore, critical that we reach some conclusions about the role of private versus public agricultural research and about what research is primarily in the public interest and what is primarily in the private interest. An overriding assumption, about which there seems little disagreement, is that the U.S. will wish to maintain its worldwide leadership in agricultural productivity, not only to maintain economic health for all workers and industries associated with agriculture and the food system in the U.S. and the independence that this health provides us as a nation, but because this capacity is important to our foreign export program.

The challenge, therefore, to the public sector of agricultural research, based on this overriding assumption, is: What is our role in sustaining the healthful aspects of the

agricultural and food systems of the U.S.? What are the problems to be addressed and what is the appropriate distribution of the problem-solving activities between the public and private sectors?

I can do little more than raise this most important issue in the space allotted for this column. Considerable study and assessment of a wide variety of opinion are required before any clear-cut consensus can be achieved about the answers to these questions.

There is little risk, however, in predicting that agricultural and food research in publicly supported institutions is going to differ from that of 30 to 50 years ago. It has already changed, so I'm really predicting evolution rather than sudden and dramatic change. Technologically, agricultural development in the U.S. is far along. The problems of the future arise from political, societal, and environmental considerations and from the fact that the necessary resources are escalating in cost and diminishing in supply.

We need to find ways in which the legitimate needs of other U.S. economic and social sectors can be accommodated when their needs seem to conflict with those of agriculture. The organized private sector, it seems to me, will be required to solve more of the problems associated with their specific products, while public agricultural research programs will be required to address problems of products, crops, and animal lives. Of course, there is no clear demarcation between these two conditions so the mix of public and private research programs will vary according to the topic. It will also be necessary to establish effective communication between public and private research programs to prevent, as much as possible, counterproductive or nonproductive consequences of both kinds of research.

A final prediction is that the importance of Cooperative Extension in the emerging program of public research will become heightened. Problems are likely to be complex and interrelated and solutions are likely to be the same. Interpreting and adapting solutions for particular situations will require the dedication of Extension.

The future for publicly supported agricultural research can be enormously satisfying to the participants and rewarding for society. Before we embark on the journey we must chart that course, because the road, as yet, is not clearly marked.