



J. B. KENDRICK, JR.

Vice President - Agriculture
and University Services

The next era — an era of limits

Living in a country with unparalleled production of food and fiber, residing in a state that ranks at the top for the diversity, abundance, and richness of agriculture, and presiding over one of the best and most comprehensive agricultural research and extension organizations anywhere should lead to a deep sense of pride and satisfaction. I readily admit to the emotion of pride, but the feeling of satisfaction somehow eludes me. Why? Because I am not convinced that publicly supported research and extension organizations in the United States have realistically prepared for the future.

There are many reasons to explain our inaction; some are mere excuses, others are real and grounded in the complexity of the system we have built. Others are based, in my judgment, on a miscalculation of future trends.

We have a plethora of studies, reports, conferences, planning documents, and projection guidelines, all of which address themselves to future needs in research and extension education in the agricultural sciences. There are some who have sounded clear warnings about the future of agricultural sciences, but these warnings have gone largely unheeded. We are, to borrow a phrase, dangerously close to paralysis by analysis.

Practically all of us who are active today in agriculture or public institutions have lived in an era of unprecedented growth in our economy as well as increasing public assistance in all aspects of our societal needs. Temporary plateaus and minor recessions have interrupted this steady growth, but the direction of change has remained upward.

During this same 40- to 45-year period, America's agriculture has changed dramatically. Production has shown impressive growth; technological advances have been rapidly and widely incorporated into farming operations; farm size has increased while the numbers of farming units have decreased; foreign exports of farm products have become a significant part of the total agricultural economy; and the development of microelectronic technology has been spectacular. It has been an exciting era to observe and to experience.

Publicly supported agricultural sciences have likewise grown during this time, albeit not as much or as dramatically as some other segments of our industrial and public assistance activities. We have grown in response to an ever-increasing demand for research and education in a wide variety of activities associated with agriculture, with the natural resources on which it depends, and with the people who use the products of agriculture. In fact, we have grown to the point where our ability to support adequately by public funding all that we are staffed to do is in serious jeopardy.

Changes projected for the remainder of this century seem to suggest unequivocally that the period of public funding for expansion or even maintenance of the many flourishing activities during these past 40 to 45 years has ended. We are moving into a new era of self-help and private-sector involvement in meeting many of society's needs.

Rather than despair at this change of direction, we need to acknowledge the inevitable and begin to plan realistically. We need to think more critically about defining our unique role in the future rather than trying to devise strategies to preserve all that we now have. What do we do or can we do that private enterprise cannot or will not do? What must we do to preserve and enhance the quality of our critically important programs and not allow deterioration to infect all programs because of insufficient support? Are we willing to make forthright decisions in setting realistic priorities?

If collectively we are unwilling to answer these questions seriously, we will prove to be unworthy of our stewardship of the public's agricultural research and extension programs. Either decay within the system will destroy its value, or major and arbitrary surgery by uninvolved outside sources may cripple it beyond repair. Our choices are not comfortable ones to make, but it is essential that we make them for the future effectiveness of publicly supported agricultural programs in research and extension. Let's not be paralyzed by analysis. We know what must be done and we must act before others do it for us.