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Perspectives on Cooperative Extension

When Cooperative Extension was established in California in 1913, its role was to serve as a link between research knowledge developed on University of California campuses and the farmers, farm families, and youth in rural communities. Its primary goals were to shorten the time it took to put the results of research to practical use and to ensure the broadest possible dissemination of new and potentially useful knowledge. There can be no question that the organization has fulfilled its goals, contributing in a significant way to the progress of California agriculture and to the benefit of society as a whole.

Yet, as Cooperative Extension approaches its 75th anniversary, there is criticism of its priorities.

It is obvious that the problems facing California have changed from the times when this was primarily a rural state dominated by rural interests and rural-oriented politics. But the rationale for Extension is as relevant today as it was in 1913.

That is not to say that Extension doesn't need to alter its focus and priorities to keep up with the changes taking place. Youth programs pose a particular challenge. When the 4-H program was initiated, it was designed to introduce rural youth to technological advances in agriculture and to assist them in career development. It functioned as a conduit to land-grant universities and other institutions of higher education. Today the 4-H program is caught in a dilemma between the maintenance of traditional programs and the need to undertake new programs to meet the realities of changing demographics and societal priorities. It is a dilemma that will not be easily resolved, but it is clear that 4-H programs must be opened to new audiences and must take advantage of innovative teaching methods and new forms of organization to do its job.

Family and consumer science programs have undergone significant changes in the last 20 years, particularly with the advent of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). Many of these programs have focused on nutritional matters and have relied on educational techniques to get their message across. Increasingly, however, family and consumer science programs have moved beyond disseminating nutritional and home economics knowledge into public policy and community development issues. The program is well suited to this role; it does not, in itself, have adequate resources to address the issues of hunger and malnutrition, for example. It does, however, have the expertise to assist community groups in dealing with these issues.

Agriculture in California has come under intensifying international economic and political pressure in the past decade. The

state once enjoyed almost free access to foreign markets without significant foreign competition. That has changed. New technology and the market forces that influence pricing have become international in scope. Many other countries in the world produce the same crops with the same technology as California, but with lower labor costs. In addition, many of these countries protect their agricultural industries with trade barriers that severely limit access to California farm products. Assisting California agriculture in maintaining and expanding foreign markets poses a particular challenge to Cooperative Extension and may be the key to its future.

Extension will be called on to restructure its programs within a total management systems context. This is not a new idea, but it is one that deserves renewed emphasis. Programs relating to production decisions, such as pest and disease management, irrigation practices, new technologies, and use of computers, will still have to be undertaken. But they will be considered as part of an overall management system that also takes into account the external forces that have an impact on the marketing of agricultural products.

Usually, when market changes occur, it is too late for many producers to adopt new strategies to deal with possible dislocations. Extension programs can be designed to help identify changes taking place and interpret them in a manner that can be useful to farmers in making production and marketing decisions. The major programs required should include reallocation of resources, technology impact assessment, foreign and domestic farm policy implications, international trade, and data base/information development.

As the world becomes more interdependent, there will continue to be changes in the production and marketing of agricultural commodities. Cooperative Extension has a unique opportunity to demonstrate that it can modify and adapt its research and educational programs to better serve its clientele.

I am confident that, with the continued support of the people of California and the dedicated efforts of its highly capable staff, Cooperative Extension will again prove that it can adjust to changing priorities as it has many times in the past 75 years.

Editor's note: Effective January 1, 1988, Dr. Siebert, who has directed Cooperative Extension in California for 12 years, went on a special assignment related to marketing of California agricultural commodities.