

Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship Spring 2002

<http://www.istl.org/02-spring/article3.html>

AgEcon Search: Partners Build a Web Resource

Louise Letnes

Librarian

Department of Applied Economics

University of Minnesota

lletnes@apec.umn.edu

Julie Kelly

Librarian

Magrath Library

University of Minnesota

jkelly@umn.edu

Abstract

AgEcon Search: Research in Agricultural and Applied Economics (<http://agecon.lib.umn.edu>) brings together a variety of literature in agricultural economics in a free web resource. It began as a project to capture fugitive working papers, and has evolved into a major web archive for literature in the field. Many partners are involved in the endeavor, and it serves as a prototype for projects in other disciplines.

Introduction

AgEcon Search is a free web resource that includes the full text (PDF files) of working papers, conference papers, and peer-reviewed journal articles in the areas of agricultural and applied economics. It is used by people in a wide range of settings, including economists, professors, farmers, students, and government workers on six continents.

While the project counts over 40 universities, professional associations, and government agencies from around the world among its members, the core of *AgEcon Search* is a partnership between the Department of Applied Economics and the University Libraries at the University of Minnesota. Two librarians, one from each unit, serve as coordinators of the project. They communicate with users and contributors, prepare documents, work with computer staff from their units, encourage new participants, and publicize the project.

About *AgEcon Search*

The *AgEcon Search* project began in 1995 as an experiment to see if it would be possible to freely deliver worldwide the electronic full text of working papers produced by university agricultural economics departments. In the seven years *AgEcon Search* has been in existence it has expanded in size to include over 4,000 papers and in scope to include other literature such as papers from meetings of professional organizations and peer reviewed agricultural economics journals. Users appreciate the convenience of having the literature of the discipline gathered in one place. But, perhaps the most valuable contribution of *AgEcon Search* is an organized library collection that is archived and will be there to serve future users. *AgEcon Search* is heavily used and reaches an international audience with users in over 100 countries from a broad span of academic, commercial and government addresses. Each of the papers on *AgEcon Search* was downloaded an average of nearly 50 times during the year 2001.

The Literature of Agricultural Economics

Working papers were chosen as the first papers to post because they are a problem literature for users and librarians. Agricultural economists share the tradition of working papers with many of the social scientists. Working papers contain the first results of new research and are disseminated to other researchers as a form of informal review. Generally, after the initial presentation, working papers undergo a final revision, often involving some compression of the information detailed in the working papers, and are published in more conventional formats, most often scholarly journals. Paper copies of working papers are difficult for libraries to collect and manage, and expensive for departments to produce and distribute. Conference papers fall into this same category of elusive, grey literature and were perfect candidates for electronic delivery as well. None of the major indexes for agricultural economics literature (CAB Abstracts, EconLit and AGRICOLA) cover the working paper/conference paper literature well, making it difficult for users to find out about or obtain these papers. Pulling together this elusive literature into one database has helped to fill a gap in the indexing of agricultural economics literature.

Partnerships Got the Project Started

The idea for *AgEcon Search* came about, according to one of the founders "in one of those magical moments that sometimes happens without any prodding, somewhere in my brain an Internet thought collided with a working paper thought and produced an Internet file of working papers. What could be more perfect for the Internet, what could be more perfect for the departments, and finally, what could be more perfect for libraries?" ([Rodkewich & Letnes 1995](#)). The agricultural economics librarian at the University of Minnesota's Magrath Library and the librarian in the Department of Applied Economics at the University Minnesota, started the project on a Gopher server with copies of WordPerfect papers from the University of Minnesota's Applied Economics Department. This initial project was successful and the appearance of the World Wide Web and Adobe Acrobat PDF files made the whole project much easier to manage and expand.

Based on the success and popularity of the electronic delivery of papers from Minnesota, several other groups were approached for involvement in the project. Information about the project, along with an invitation to participate was presented to the Agricultural Economics Reference Organization (AERO)-an organization of librarians serving agricultural economics in department and main libraries. The project was enthusiastically endorsed by the organization. The University of Wisconsin's Department of Agricultural Economics was the first organization to join the effort, with other Land Grant departments soon to follow. The American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA) was also approached -- both for financial support and professional endorsement. Both were granted, with the AAEA designating *AgEcon Search* as its electronic repository. The group assigned a board member to serve as a liaison with *AgEcon Search*. The Farm Foundation was also approached successfully for funding support. In addition the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service supplied financial support for several years, viewing the project as a direct benefit to their researchers. This partnering of academic institutions, libraries, professional scholarly associations, and government agencies has made a strong foundation for the growth of *AgEcon Search*.

A Wide Range of Partners Contribute Scholarly Content in Many Forms

The large number of organizations contributing to *AgEcon Search* has allowed it to reach a critical mass of information and thus become useful to those seeking documents on a wide range of topics in the field. The types of items include:

- Working papers
- Conference papers
- Journal articles
- Research reports
- Book chapters
- Theses

As of March 2002, over 40 organizations have partnered with *AgEcon Search* to submit papers. The first adopters were agricultural economics departments in Land Grant Universities in the United States, with most major departments participating. Next to join was the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA) by posting the selected papers presented at their annual summer meetings. Papers from the AAEA have been available since 1997. Other national and regional professional associations have also used *AgEcon Search* as a repository for their conference papers or working papers. A sampling of these include:

- International Agricultural Trade Research Consortium
- Western Agricultural Economics Association
- Western Regional Coordinating Committee on Rangeland WCC-55
- University of Wisconsin, Land Tenure Center
- Regional Research Project NE-165
- NCR-134

The following journals are included in *AgEcon Search*. Only parts of the journals are presently available, but the back issues are in process.

- *Journal of Food Distribution Research*
- *Agricultural and Resource Economics Review*

International contributors come from Canada, Israel, Mozambique and Australia, with several other international groups expressing interest in joining the effort.

Partners Share the Load

The success of *AgEcon Search* would not have happened without the efforts of individuals at the various institutions involved. At most institutions a designated person serves as the contact for *AgEcon Search*. This person gathers papers, verifies that they are in the correct format (or creates the PDF files themselves) and submits the papers via the online submission form. This means that on the receiving end, the paper needs little attention -- just an approval from the submission form and it appears on the server. For projects that require more work on the part of the *AgEcon Search* staff -- work such as creating PDF files, scanning papers, etc., the institution is asked to make a contribution to cover the cost of staff time. This support has come from organizations like the AAEA where individual authors are each submitting their own papers -- many of them without the capability of making PDF files, or from organizations that want their journal articles scanned and archived on *AgEcon Search*.

Partners Keep *AgEcon Search* Strong

Many groups feel ownership of the project, from those who contribute heavily to others who represent users of *AgEcon Search*. Many of the academic institutions that send in working papers also make them available on their own web sites, but choose to become part of *AgEcon Search* as well, often offering links to *AgEcon Search* on their web sites.

The AAEA pays the expenses for an *AgEcon Search* booth in the exhibit hall at their annual meeting, and requires its members to submit their conference papers to *AgEcon Search*, thus strengthening the collection of documents. The Economic Statistics and Information Resources Committee of the AAEA requests a report about the project at its annual meeting and provides feedback on its use of the service. The AAEA Foundation has provided financial support to other groups who wish to make their documents part of the project.

The Farm Foundation, which provided some of the initial funding for *AgEcon Search*, also financially supports the Agricultural Economics Reference Association (AERO), whose members are great users and champions of the project. An official report on *AgEcon Search* is part of each of its national meetings, and many members of AERO are also the contact people for their institutions, keeping the flow of new documents going.

The National Agricultural Library adds links to *AgEcon Search* documents in its Agricola database, which allows users to obtain the ever-popular full text. Many of those items may never have been linked in Agricola if a centralized resource such as *AgEcon Search* had not existed.

The University of Minnesota Libraries and the Department of Applied Economics have made a commitment to *AgEcon Search*. The library and the department each contribute about 5% of a professional staff person toward this effort. The University Libraries also contribute hardware and software, plus technical staff support. In addition, the University Libraries has provided seed funds to support new initiatives such as digitizing the back issues of regional journals and staff papers.

Many of the supporters of *AgEcon Search* have been involved since the beginning, and their continued attention has allowed the project to flourish.

Partners Share the Glory

In addition to sharing the work of *AgEcon Search*, the partners share in the benefits of the project. When *AgEcon Search* was structured, one of the goals was to help contributing departments maintain their institutional identity on *AgEcon Search*. To that end, papers from *AgEcon Search* are available for browsing or searching. The home page has a search box that searches the complete bibliographic information for the paper (including the abstract). The home page also contains a drop-down box listing all of the contributing institutions. Selecting an institution leads the user to another page with the choice of viewing all papers contributed by that particular institution, or searching the papers of the particular institution. Several institutions link directly to the institutional list of papers from their departmental home pages instead of maintaining a list of their own working papers. *AgEcon Search* includes a statistics counter for each paper/institution.

Future

The role of *AgEcon Search* is growing in two strategic directions: including a wider range of documents from new and existing partners, and serving as an archive for the literature of agricultural and applied economics.

Several current partners are working on adding more of their documents to *AgEcon Search*. Some groups that are currently contributing conference papers are considering adding their journals, and several institutions are interested in digitizing and sending the backfiles of their working papers, as the University of Minnesota has recently done. Conference papers from new groups are also being actively sought, and professional organizations that publish journals in the field have been contacted and asked to consider including their current and back issues.

Over the years of *AgEcon Search's* existence, the issue of preserving digital material has been recognized as a challenge for libraries. Although *AgEcon Search* began as a solution to the challenges of locating current working papers, it has grown into the repository for the literature in the field, and older materials are now actively solicited.

AgEcon Search As a Prototype

While the Internet holds the promise of delivering full-text literature to the desktop of every interested user, it has not become the reality in most disciplines. Much of the focus around this issue in the library community has been on the high prices of commercial journals. *AgEcon Search* represents an effort for librarians to have a positive effect on the digitization of the literature in one field of study. It began with the grey literature in the field, and has grown to include conference papers, journal articles and books.

The information flow and resulting literature is different in every field, and librarians may have a larger role to play in helping users gain electronic access to the work in many disciplines. Examples such as *AgEcon Search* and the physics preprint server, now at Cornell University ([Luce 2001](#)), may serve as prototypes for projects in other areas, and partnerships may be the key to starting and sustaining such projects.

References

Luce, R. E. 2001. E-prints intersect the digital library: inside the Los Alamos arXiv. *Issues in Science & Technology Librarianship* no29, Winter 2001. [Online]. Available: <http://www.istl.org/01-winter/article3.html> [May 3, 2002].

Rodkewich, P. M. and Letnes L. M. 1995. *AgEcon Search: Research in Agricultural Economics-Papers on the Internet*. *Journal of Agricultural and Food Information*. 32(2): 23-29.