

The WAEA as Heir-Apparent of a Regional Mandate

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Sixty years ago agricultural economists established a regional professional organization now called the WAEA. As it evolved, interest-based member constituencies emerged. Perspective for discussion of WAEA actions, activities, and roles as the heir-apparent professional organization for western region agricultural economists is provided through identification of conditions and problems endemic to the region, and commentary on the decline of alternative regional organizations.

Key words: agricultural economics, future directions, WAEA, *WJAE*.

In April of 1987 when Association President Glenn Helmers and I agreed that I would contribute through this paper to the ongoing discussion of the WAEA's future, it seemed to be a good opportunity to express my views and to stimulate discussion. I should have written the paper immediately, because the proposed content then seemed manageable and easily dealt with.

As the weeks passed and I perused DeLoach's history of the Association, read the minutes of past business meetings, and thought about the future of the Association as a professional entity primarily identified with nineteen states and four provinces, reality showed its less-than-smiling face. Differences of opinion about the Association are rooted in divergent professional interests, work responsibilities, and individual preferences. The decision to include discussion of the Association's future in the annual meeting program provided mute evidence that, despite several years of interchange, the membership has not identified a mutually desired future.

At the same time, the materials I examined, limited conversations with members, and a

number of activities in which I have taken part indicate the Association has evolved and adapted over the years. Given that demonstrated ability to adapt, it seemed best to focus on background and ideas that might stimulate thought and discussion. Thus, the paper provides perspectives on the nature of the western region as a present and future arena for members' work and a number of assertions about the Association's nature and potential. The paper briefly examines four aspects of the situation: (a) characteristics of the regional arena, (b) the nature of WAEA members' professional interests, (c) expected future conditions in the region, and (d) actions that the Association might take as specific responses to that expected future.

The Regional Arena

As a group of civil jurisdictions hereafter referred to as the "western region," the nineteen states and four provinces with present WAEA council membership include the Great Plains and intermountain West, plus the Hawaiian Islands and the vast reaches of Alaska. It is a region characterized by great diversity of topography, resource endowment, climate, economic activity, population attributes, and institutional arrangements. The resulting complexity can be dealt with here only through

¹ When dealing with such a large and varied geographic region, generalities always are accompanied by a high level of risk. Each assertion about the nature of a regional attribute can be countered

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generalities, despite the risks inherent to that approach.¹

In a 1969 paper, John Muehlbeier described the Great Plains with words that could be used to describe all but the region's coastal borders: "The region is characterized by variable precipitation, extremes of temperature, a complex pattern of soils, a short growing season in the north, high evaporation in the south, high wind velocities, and high drought frequencies . . . is sparsely populated and largely agricultural."

Extensive rangeland agriculture and large-scale crop production are carried on in the arid and semiarid plains and intermountain plateaus of the western region. Where water supplies permit, public and private irrigation system investments have modified local microclimates, making possible more intensive crop production despite slight to extreme growing season evapotranspiration deficits. Proposals for water resource development through large-scale, high-cost projects continue to be advanced despite evidence that, in many locations, present withdrawals from the hydrologic system exceed natural replenishments (Gessaman and Erickson).

Long distances to industrial centers, wide spacing of transportation arteries, and relative isolation of producing units increase input costs and limit access to markets. Chronic commodity surpluses, a highly variable continental climate, and price/production cycles characteristic of primary agricultural production interact to foster a "boom and bust" economy.

Forestry and mineral extraction industries of the region also are scattered across vast areas and incur high transportation costs.² Like agriculture, these primary industries are subject to cyclical extremes of prosperity and adversity, though their cycles are largely independent of weather-induced shifts in supply that characterize agricultural commodity production.

With Calgary, Denver, and Salt Lake City as notable exceptions, urban centers serving the region are located along its periphery or outside its boundaries. Larger municipalities within the region contain agglomerations of light and medium industries, provide com-

mercial and financial services, are the locations of transportation nodes, and support very limited heavy industrial production. Ground transportation arteries follow routes identified a century or more ago and reflect routing decisions based primarily on topography. The interior's dominant industries (agriculture, forestry, and mineral extraction) are characterized by high capital intensity, large organizational and production units, and close linkages with state, provincial, and national political systems.

Land tenure patterns demonstrate the combined effects of homesteading; land grants to states and railroads; treaties creating Reservations and Trust Lands of Native American tribal groups; acts creating military reservations, national parks, state parks, wilderness areas, national forests, and national grasslands; and federal retention of lands never separated from the public domain. Public lands, lands set aside for special uses, and land held in private ownership are intermixed throughout the region.

Owners and operators largely determine the use of privately owned land. Management outcomes range from exploitation to careful stewardship of resources. Management of public lands and trust lands reflects similar variability in approach with numerous examples of inconsistencies, and attainment of varying levels of conservation (exploitation) of natural resources.

Multiple-use mandates on public lands range from those closely restricting private access to others where private interests are paramount. Large private ownership tracts held by entities such as railroads, forestry product companies, and other large private corporations, may or may not be available for public uses. Natural resource management decision making continues to evolve as recreation, conservation, and preservation interests increasingly participate in decision making. Changing economic conditions and shifts in the national political climate alter the nature and extent of special-interest roles but have not ruled out their continued participation.

Decades of migration have generated large changes in the location and concentration of population. Urban centers have rapidly increased in size and complexity. Coastal margins and inland sites with high scenic attractiveness and/or desirable climate have grown swiftly as business units have relocated, new

with an example from within the region that contradicts the assertion. Rather than qualify every statement with "generally," "mostly," or "usually," I have stated many generalities as though they were universal truths.

² Energy industries (petroleum production, coal mining, and uranium mining) are classified as mineral extraction for purposes of this discussion.

investments have been made, and individuals have led or followed the resulting increases in business activity. Large numbers of documented aliens and countless undocumented aliens have joined these internal migration flows while adding to the ethnic and cultural diversity of urban populations. Concomitant with urban area growth, outmigration from agricultural regions has continued. Recent financial pressures have accelerated farm consolidation and added to the forces sustaining internal migration streams.

Local, state (provincial), and national institutions and institutional systems have been, and continue to be, of paramount importance in the western region. As argued elsewhere, the rhetoric of rugged individualism as an economic order continues to be a principal mythology of the region (Gessaman). In the midst of that mythology, major reliance is placed on institutional systems as providers of the necessities and the luxuries of life. Goods and services provided through the market, services directly provided by government, and services provided through the regulatory and entitlement mandates of government agencies are used to support the social and economic well-being of residents. Despite rhetorical disclaimers, government agency programs and their related institutional systems have become vitally important components of the western region's resource base.

When people depend on institutional systems for their well-being, institutional inadequacies, institutional lags, and limited institutional responses to local conditions cause major problems for individuals, groups, and business units. Ever-increasing numbers of special interest groups and organizations signify that residents recognize their dependence on institutions (institutional systems) that serve the region. Despite frequent verbal allegiance to "going it alone," residents continue to affirm and support group action.

Thus, the western region provides innumerable opportunities for research, education, and service activities of agricultural economists. But, agricultural economists have found it not easy to sustain an Association that facilitates professional responses to opportunities within and outside the region. Frustration has become evident, and diversity of member interests has fostered subgroups within the Association membership. Members do

not agree on the Association's purpose, nor do they have a shared image of what it should be.

Interests of WAEA Members

Basics of human social participation indicate that, for participation to continue over time, perceived returns from financial, psychic, and physical investments in a group or organization must equal or exceed the perceived costs of such investments. Whether cast in the careful logic and terminology of Buchanan and Tullock or offered as casual commentary on observed behavior, the reality cannot be escaped; humans participate in group activities when the perceived returns from doing so exceed the costs of participation.

The Association, now called the WAEA, was formed in 1927 when F. B. Headley acted to fill a void resulting from the lack of a "regional professional association" that would facilitate communication among professional economists in the West. As related by DeLoach, Headley's efforts in the early years of the Association "reflect the desire and need of some of the founders of the WAEA to establish a professional identity for western agricultural economists." These actions occurred at a time when western agricultural economists found time, distance, and the cost of travel to be important barriers to interchange with colleagues and counterparts within the region. DeLoach's history recounts Association efforts to fill that need during the 1927-68 period and summarizes actions and activities undertaken by agricultural economists whose actions indicate Association membership benefits were greater than participation costs.

The Association was not the only such organizational system in the West. The Western Research Council flourished for years, then faded from visibility. In its years of activity, the Great Plains Council stimulated many multidisciplinary efforts. Membership in the Council, and/or participation in standing or ad hoc committees, improved communication and stimulated research and educational activities focused on problems and issues of the Great Plains. Numerous technical research committees, uncounted multistate projects, and interest groups of professionals have transcended civil jurisdictions and institutional barriers while stimulating improved profes-

sional interchange. The 1927 barriers of time and distance have been swept away by innovations in transportation and communications. Need for the WAEA changed and changed again as conditions changed and institutional systems evolved.

Annual business meeting minutes, the Association history, and discussions with associates knowledgeable of the Association convey an image of emerging organizational fragmentation. At least three well-defined constituencies and a more nebulous fourth constituency have emerged as members pursue their professional interests. From my perspective, the constituencies are as follows:

—A constituency of persons with professional interests that include the desire to identify with, and to be a part of, the “leading edge” of the profession. The degree to which their work is directly and immediately applicable to problems deemed important by residents of the jurisdictions in which they work is secondary to their disciplinary interests. This constituency contributed directly to rapid metamorphosis of the *WJAE* into a strong professional journal and would like to see the Association become a (possibly, the) premier professional association of agricultural economists. Some in this constituency are located outside the western region, others have lifelong professional involvement within the nineteen states and four provinces. Members of this constituency support further transformation of the *Journal* as a principal means of attaining ends that they feel are important to themselves and to the profession.

—A constituency of persons with problem/locality-oriented professional interests and a desire to participate in professional interchange with others of similar interests through the Association and its activities. This constituency generally supported the pre-*WJAE* practice of publishing a proceedings issue from the Association’s annual meetings, supported having *Journal* pages reserved for publication of annual meeting papers, and would find little satisfaction in further transformation of the *Journal* and the Association. Their professional identity is linked to applied problem solving, and they have limited interest in challenging the AAFA’s position as the dominant professional association for agricultural economists.

—A constituency of persons with profes-

sional interests focused on problems of particular importance in the western region who desire to participate in professional interchange with others who share their interests. Members of this constituency will rely on Association activities for their professional interchange to the extent that the Association provides an arena suitable for their needs. At the same time they will use (or will create) other arenas if the Association does not provide the opportunities they want.

—A somewhat more nebulous constituency of what I believe to be the “silent majority” of the Association membership. They are agricultural economists who have both a personal and a professional interest in the Association, who want continued access to the *Journal*, and may or may not participate in the annual meetings. At times these persons may identify with one or more of the three constituencies described above. As their professional responsibilities, work, and interests change, their perceptions of desirable Association characteristics also change. They are pragmatists who practice flexibility of response to fulfill their high priority professional interests.

Assuming that I have, with reasonable accuracy, defined these major constituencies, it is not surprising that Association members differ in their preferences for the future of the Association. At the same time, it is important to recognize that these differences do not require Association members to be at odds with one another. Each constituency shares a legitimate professional interest. Before suggesting Association responses to the interests of these constituencies, let us consider the expected future of the western region, i.e., let us identify some characteristics of the arena for Association members’ work during the next decade.

Changes in the Western Region

When predicting the future, it is best to make assertions about conditions many decades from the present. In that way, when the time arrives for which predictions were made, both the predictor and the reader will have gone on to their respective rewards, and the predictor cannot be challenged over the inevitable “gaps” between predicted and actual outcomes.

The nature of this paper precludes my taking refuge in the finiteness of human life. My per-

spectives must be for the near-term future, an approach that carries with it innumerable opportunities for being reminded of my imperfect foresight. Recognizing this, my predictions about the arena for western region agricultural economists' work during the balance of this century will be uncharacteristically brief.

Trends now underway indicate that a reasonable person might expect the near future to include at least these conditions or characteristics:

—Producers of agricultural commodities and other primary products will have increased exposure to input and product market price fluctuations as commodity price support programs are reduced and tariff and quota protections are lowered in exchange for improved world market access.

—Use pressures on the region's natural resource base will increase as population and resource consumption increase. Mineral extraction, forestry product production, and agriculture will face higher environmental quality standards and will be called on to allow multiple uses in areas with high scenic or aesthetic quality. Outsider involvement in natural resource management decisions will increase. Both water supply shortages and water quality problems will become more prevalent.

—Population numbers will increase rapidly in migration destinations, and in areas with concentrations of high-fecundity populations. As major migration destinations, most urban centers will struggle to provide needed services. Depopulation of sparsely settled rural areas will continue as land is retired from production, farms are consolidated, agriculturally dependent small towns decline, and out-migrants continue patterns of relocation established decades ago.

—The resource base for institutions and programs will continue to be restricted as tax support of agencies and universities remains relatively low. Agricultural economists and professionals in other disciplines will continue to experience periodic or continuing retrenchment and redirection of effort.

—Institutional arrangements through which agricultural economists secure opportunities for interchange with colleagues, information sharing with counterparts in other parts of the western region, and logistical support (including political support) for their work, will not maintain a high level of visibility and efficacy.

Thus, their professional association participation will be a principal means by which agricultural economists will maintain professional contacts.

Other endogenous and exogenous changes will occur throughout the balance of the century. Undoubtedly some of the unforeseen will be at least as important as the changes identified above. Regardless, change will be the usual condition—adjustment and redirection will be required as agricultural economists respond to the emerging future.

WAEA Responses

The situation of the Association appears to contain some clearly evident choices. The Association could assume that the interaction needs of agricultural economists will be met through entities and institutional systems other than the Association, and that the Association need not concern itself with such supporting roles. Or the members could decide that it is in their best interest for the Association to become an active support mechanism for western region agricultural economists.

If the latter course is chosen, the WAEA would concentrate its energies on increasing the corporate and individual response capabilities of agricultural economists. In so doing, it would be renewing a past commitment—accepting an inherited responsibility for organizational and institutional support of agricultural economists in the western region. Thus, it would be making a renewed commitment to improving the effectiveness of persons who bring the unique perspectives of an agricultural economist to existing and emerging problem situations of the western region.

If the Association accepts this inherited regional mandate for supporting roles, actions to be taken in fulfilling that mandate should directly focus on the legitimate professional interests of its varied constituencies. If effectively carried out, the "emerging organizational fragmentation" I referred to previously would be reduced and the support system for agricultural economists would be improved. To accomplish these ends, I suggest starting with actions such as these:

—Heal within-association divisions over the nature and focus of the *Journal* by implementing an approach manner similar to that used by some of the professional associations

in mathematics and statistics: (a) Continue publication of the *Western Journal of Agricultural Economics* (I advocate retaining the "Western" identity) while ensuring that its quality is second to none. Consider restoring the policy of giving preference to manuscripts on topics of special interest in the West. (b) Initiate a second journal series mandated to publish applied research and/or technology transfer reports on topics of current interest. Published reports would include some items that were more situation-specific than those customarily accepted in the *WJAE*. One issue in each year's sequence would be a proceedings of the annual meeting for which submitted manuscripts would be subjected to peer reviews conducted in the same manner as for articles published in the other issues.

—Facilitate interaction between agricultural economists with related interests by encouraging and facilitating work group meetings to be held immediately following the annual meetings. Work groups would meet by prior arrangement, would have self-selected membership, programs arranged by the organizers, and would provide a forum for problem-focused discussion and interaction. Work group sessions would be arenas for identifying problems, conceptualizing research methods, sharing insights, and building working relationships.

—Design and implement a continuing linkage between the WAEA Council, the WAEA membership, and the regional organizations of agricultural economics department heads and research administrators. Use these linkages to stimulate policy research and policy formulation and to strengthen agricultural economists' direct contributions to improved organizational and institutional arrangements in the western region.

These ideas are only a start. Members can and will identify many other Association roles that would directly support members' intellectual development and professional productivity. If the potential I believe is present in the Association is to be realized, it is vitally important that returns-costs calculus of members yield results favorable to participation. That will not occur if one constituency "wins"

in a way that prevents realization of the legitimate professional interests of other constituencies. In better words than mine, DeLoach (p. 43) described this opportunity: "It appears that a crucial issue before the members of the WAEA is whether their organization should embark on a route of further professionalization and institutionalization in order to issue a professional journal and provide members with another publication outlet or continue its informal structure and acknowledge that many benefits, not otherwise obtainable, can come out of the WAEA emphasis on western problems, professional improvement, and fraternization."

We have the *Journal*, and it is a very good journal. We have a high degree of professionalization. I suggest that we build on these accomplishments and accept a regional mandate for continued emphasis on western problems, professional improvement, fraternization, and improved communication. And I also suggest that we develop continuing communication and organizational linkages with the institutional systems that support our work and other major aspects of our professional lives.

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