

# The WAEA—Which Niche in the Profession?

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The Western Agricultural Economics Association has evolved through challenges that have had both regional and national dimensions. We continue to seek our niche in the profession. The challenge for both current and future leadership will be to rationalize the diversity of membership interests into a program which provides both challenge and sustenance for all member participants. The Association should give significant forethought to leading informed discussion and research on significant problems and issues of the West. We should continue to address these in our annual meetings and in our journal or alternative publications.

*Key words:* agricultural economics, annual meetings, publications, refereed journal, the western region.

When President Helmers contacted me in April to enlist my participation on the panel, "The WAEA—Images of the Future," it was under the guise that there were some who felt my position regarding the WAEA was intermediate to polar positions existent among the Association's membership. That came as sort of a surprise, but I accepted the challenge as an opportunity to again participate in the WAEA, a professional and social group with which I have always had strong interest and affinity. Having accepted the invitation, I eagerly awaited the president's letter in which he was to further describe the tasks before the three panelists, the pithy part of which is quoted below:

There appears to be three general positions regarding what the future role of the WAEA should be. The first is that the WAEA is a regional association of members who study common problems of the West. Hence, the programs and activities of the association (including the

journal) should reflect this. A second position is that the WAEA is a maturing profession, and regionality no longer is important. Hence, the WAEA should expand its activities, attempt the scope of activities of the AAEA, and eliminate regionality as a common bond.

This brings one to the third view, which some have suggested that you hold. That is that the WAEA not attempt to emulate the AAEA because of the high costs of such efforts. Hence, the WAEA should remain in scope about where it presently is.

No further direction was given!

I, like many members, I suspect, am unsure about the present scope of Association activities and whether they reflect the desires of the membership. To meet the Presidential mandate, I review the history of the Association and evaluate its current activity and, in the process, develop some thoughts about this Association's problems and issues, seeking finally to find the nonpolar view. I am not sure whether this will turn out to be the sought-after intermediate view, but it is a third view and my view. *Caveat emptor!*

## A Historical Overview of the Growth and Development of the WAEA

There is much to be gained from understanding the historical evolution of an organization such as ours. Three sources were used: (a) the excellent WAEA monograph written in the late

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1960s by Bart DeLoach, (b) Association minutes contained in the 1969 through 1975 proceedings issues, and (c) WAEA minutes supplied by Maurice Baker for the post-1975 period (except those for 1976, 1977, and 1979, which were apparently disposed of by an overly conscientious janitor). My brief review, however, should not deter those seriously interested in the Association's history from reading the DeLoach monograph. It is extremely informative and recommended most highly.

Professor F. B. Headley, of Nevada, provided the leadership in establishing the Western Society of Farm Economics. The first meeting was held in Reno in June 1927 as a section of the eleventh annual meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Headley's two objectives for the society were:

(1) to familiarize the members with important work others are doing "along lines in which they may personally not be interested . . . [thereby to] broaden our point of view and give a general idea of the agricultural problems as a whole"; and (2) to provide an opportunity for every economist to participate in round table discussions on "range management, cost of production studies, extension work in economics, marketing projects and problems, etc." (DeLoach, page 8)

The 1928 Constitution of the Western Society of Farm Economics formalized the basic objectives: ". . . to promote acquaintance and intercourse among those who are engaged in the work of investigating the problems of extending a knowledge of agricultural economics in the 11 western states, to cooperate with other institutions engaged in similar or related activities, and in general to promote the professional interests of the members" (DeLoach, p. 9). Thus, from the outset, there were strong social and professional objectives in the minds of the founder(s) of this Association.

There was identifiable tension between the regional and national associations in the early years. Among reasons cited were the high cost of attending national meetings (usually held in eastern states) and specific regional needs, including those of irrigated farming. Henry Erdman, in 1930, argued that "every farm economist should give serious consideration to becoming members (sic) if interested in a professional career." (DeLoach, p. 10). But when the western association subsequently sought affiliation with the American Farm Economics Association, it was rebuffed by the AFEA's insistence that all regional association

members had to be AFEA members. The AFEA/WFEA split remained until 1944, when Karl Brandt led an initiative for cooperation, leading to the publication of some WFEA papers in the *Journal of Farm Economics (JFE)* and the possibility of joint membership that would benefit both associations. The first joint meeting of the western regional and national associations of farm economists was subsequently approved and held in 1949 (DeLoach, pp. 18-21).

Writing at the end of the 1960s, DeLoach identified eight special problems, though several appear to be long-term ones, which were effectively resolved by 1969. By the end of the 1960s, the Western Agricultural Economics Association had matured to a stable organization of the thirteen western states (with the addition of Alaska and Hawaii), sponsored an annual meeting with awards competition and published a single proceedings volume. The constitution of the Western Agricultural Economics Association in 1969 contained the following statement:

Article II. Purposes and Objectives. The purposes and objectives of the Western Agricultural Economics Association shall be to foster the study and understanding of agricultural economics and its applications to problems in the Western United States; to promote unity and effectiveness of effort among all concerned with those problems; to promote improvement in the professional competence and standards of members; to cooperate with other organizations and institutions engaged in similar or related activities; and to increase the contribution of agricultural economics to human welfare." (DeLoach, pages 43-44)

The eight problems identified by DeLoach (pp. 38-43) were: (a) *Cooperation with American Agricultural Economics Association*. This was an issue which was apparently resolved satisfactorily. (b) *Regional research and WAEA*. This concern was whether growing regional research and the opportunity for research interaction might dilute the need for the WAEA. (c) *Social activities of the WAEA*. DeLoach seemed to reflect the opinion that locations for annual meetings ought to be selected to accommodate family vacation plans. He noted that the extension of the "contributed paper" system as a means of obtaining travel funds for members had not tended to lower the quality of papers read at the meetings. (d) *The WAEA proceedings*. This was recognized as a major financial outlay of the Association. Publication of a journal was being considered. (e)

*Programs for annual meetings.* DeLoach describes responses from past presidents regarding program development: "It is evident . . . that some of the results were better than others." (f) *Is a merger with the AAEA desirable?* Apparently not, for "there is as much reason now for an organization that emphasizes western agricultural problems as there was when the WAEA was founded." DeLoach, however, expressed concern "that members of WAEA who have attained national prominence seldom attend western meetings unless they are asked to present a major paper," an attitude which "detracts from one of the WAEA's purposes, i.e., to afford younger members of the profession an opportunity to associate with, . . . to listen to and to participate in discussions" with more nationally prominent agricultural economists. (g) *Change of name.* The regional and national association names had been changed to the WAEA and AAEA, respectively. (h) *Is further institutionalization desirable?*

This issue, plus the concerns about Association publication activity and the structure of the annual meetings, remains unresolved and accounts, in part, for the divergence of views existent among the Association membership (and among the members of this panel). DeLoach commented (pp. 42-43):

The most striking characteristic of our WAEA is that it has not become highly institutionalized. In some respects, it operates as a club composed of professional agricultural economists who meet once each year to discuss economic and social problems of current interest to the members. The two formalized activities are the programming of the various papers and discussions for the annual meetings and the publication of the *Proceedings*. . . .

In contrast, the American Agricultural Economics Association has become highly institutionalized. By virtue of its size and the business and editorial activities associated with the publication of the *Journal of Agricultural Economics* and its annual *Proceedings*, there is an ever increasing formalization of its structure and operating methods. Much of this formalization is necessary for the publication of the *Journal* and *Proceedings*. . . .

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. As they now

operate, one might conclude that WAEA and AAEA complement each other. The real danger seems to lie in the possibility that any further institutionalization of WAEA might lead to unnecessary duplication of AAEA and higher membership cost to the professional agricultural economists in the western states.

### Assessment of the More Recent Past

Not much has changed in the past two decades. The search for items of interest in more recent minutes of the WAEA annual meetings reveals little besides reports of increasing annual membership dues. Either not much really happened, or the Association's secretaries have really briefed heated debates on hot issues, if there were any. Some landmarks:

- 1971 Membership dues raised from \$2 to \$5 per year
- 1974 Membership expanded to include four western Canadian provinces and six plains states
- 1977 Publication of the first issue of the *WJAE*
- 1978 Membership dues increased from \$6 to \$10 per year
- 1983 Membership dues increased to \$12.50
- 1984 Membership dues increased to \$15
- 1985 The "western preference statement" for articles was dropped from the *WJAE*

Last year, in 1986, the need for additional revenues to support the *Journal* led the membership wisely to accept the idea that the price elasticity of demand was more inelastic for page charges than for annual membership dues. The approved increase in page charges to \$60 per page means that page charges for the *WJAE* exceed those for the *AJAE* by 33%.

My tentative conclusion is that a reputable journal can name its price to authors (or author's institutions), for journal publications continue to evolve from being a means to an end—facilitating the transfer of useful knowledge and information and serving as a collective good—to ends in themselves for less collective and more individualistic reasons. I also contend that our 1986 action regarding page charges recognizes the common good nature of our journal for the larger profession. The transfer of the journal's cost to author-users, many of whom are nonwesterners in the largest WEAE definition and who write on nonwestern topics, is an attempt to account more correctly for those external benefits to the profession. The 1985 decision sought also to free the *WJAE* from any western stigma among the larger community of agricultural economics professionals.

As is evident, we have been largely concerned about financing the Association's publications, and not much more, over the past two decades. The benefit of the annual meetings has been lost for the wider (nonattende) membership by the sequential cancellation of, first, the proceedings papers and, later, non-refereed invited papers from the *Journal*. I assume that the ratio of paper presenters to total registrants at our annual meetings is now nearer to unity than was true in the DeLoach era, when many regional technical committees also held their annual meetings in conjunction with WAEA's and when those meetings had a widely accepted social content (i.e., there were compelling reasons for attending even if one was not on the formal program). In those days, the region covered by the Association was smaller so that meeting locales were more proximate and possibly more attractive for a combination of professional and vacation plans.

### A View of the Current Status of the WAEA and Its Activities

The image of this Association in the future is likely to be influenced by our actions with regard to the annual meetings and the *Journal* and other publication activity. One, or both, of the polar positions will likely argue for an expanded agenda. I have no quarrel with trying to expand meeting and publication activities to increase benefits to the membership and the larger profession. The challenge is to identify activities that will result in increased membership (and revenues) needed to support the augmented agenda.

Because price (membership dues) times quantity (number of members) equals total revenue, both increased dues and membership numbers are crucial to the Association's ability to fund an expansion of WAEA activities. Let us take a quick look at both stylistic variables.

First, the issue of membership numbers. Karl Brandt, in 1944, forecasted that the WAEA could have a membership of 700–800 by 1946 (DeLoach, p. 19), but he was overly optimistic. WAEA membership did rise above 500 by 1953, above 600 by 1957, above 700 by 1961, and approached 800 (786) in 1968 (DeLoach, p. 22). However, as shown in table 1, despite the steady and gradual increase in membership in the two preceding decades, membership numbers crashed in the 1970s (to nearly 400)

as a result of an unanticipated change in the annual application/renewal process, namely, the AAEA's dropping joint memberships from their annual dues form. With the subsequent reestablishment of joint memberships (plus several successful joint AAEA-WAEA meetings and the emergence of a quality journal), membership grew rapidly in the early 1980s, increasing by 100 or more annually from 609 in 1980 to 976 in 1983. It has since plateaued. The major increase in the membership roster came from "Plains States" and "Other U.S." origins (table 1). The number of memberships from the "13 Western States" is at levels experienced in the late 1960s, suggesting that the traditional, founding region is not a large market for future membership growth. (Recapturing the decline in membership since 1984, a decline of 15%, would add 73 members to the total.) Thus, success in the quest for additional members appears to lie in "Other U.S." and "Other (non-U.S.) country" markets. However, expansion in those markets may not be particularly compatible with Association goals if they are construed by the membership and officers to be the continuation (or resumption) of a strong western regional orientation.

Second, the matter of membership dues. I am not convinced that the price (dues) can be further increased without evidence of clear and tangible benefits for a wider membership. Currently, revenues support the publication of the *Journal* and the annual meetings. The nature of the 1986 debate over the increase in membership dues suggests that the demand for WAEA membership might be relatively elastic, given the current slate of Association activities. I conclude that current conditions constrain our ability to expand the program unless activities are developed that have a wider distribution of benefits to the general membership.

### *The Journal*

As an association, I believe we have successfully invested in and developed (with the excellent guidance of several outstanding editors) the second most important national journal for U.S. agricultural economists. It may just be that the *Western Journal of Agricultural Economics* is the premier applied journal in the profession. It is not only the chosen journal for publishing applied articles relating to the western region, it is also a national journal of

**Table 1. WAEA Membership, 1965-74 and 1980-86**

Year	13 Western States	6 Great Plains States	Other U.S.	Canada	Other Countries	Total
1965 <sup>a</sup>	393	-----	255 -----	-----	42 -----	690
1966	466	-----	250 -----	-----	36 -----	752
1967	436	-----	270 -----	-----	37 -----	743
1968 <sup>a</sup>	462	-----	276 -----	-----	48 -----	786
1969	447	91	142	14	21	715
1970	417	106	150	13	16	702
1971	385	75	95	16	7	578
1972	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	471
1973	312	58	73	12	9	464
1974 <sup>a</sup>	275	61	79	14 <sup>b</sup>	9	438
1975-79 <sup>c</sup>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A <sup>c</sup>
1980	320	152	91	31 <sup>b</sup>	15	609
1981	360	186	126	32 <sup>b</sup>	20	724
1982 <sup>a</sup>	404	194	169	38 <sup>b</sup>	27	832
1983	442	248	215	44 <sup>b</sup>	27	976
1984	485	241	210	46 <sup>b</sup>	28	1,010
1985	425	251	224	47 <sup>b</sup>	29	976
1986 <sup>a</sup>	401	234	245	45 <sup>b</sup>	26	951
1987	412	227	266	43 <sup>b</sup>	29	977

Source: 1965-68 data from DeLoach (p. 22); subsequent years from selected WAEA minutes.

<sup>a</sup> Years of joint AAEA-WAEA meetings (also 1977 and 1979).

<sup>b</sup> Four western Canadian provinces.

<sup>c</sup> Not available, lost or unavailable minutes.

some repute. Fourteen of twenty-six articles in the last volume carry lead authorships from outside the region. (In answer to a possible trivial pursuit question, if you are asked, "What journal contained three articles from Florida, two each from Arkansas, Georgia, and Washington State, and one each from VPI, Arizona, New Mexico State, and Alberta?"—the correct answer is the most recent, December 1986, issue of the *WJAE*.)

As part of my review, I surveyed authors of articles appearing in the May and December 1986 issues of the *WJAE*, asking specifically about their reasons for selecting our journal, whether the *WJAE* was their first choice selection (i.e., had their *WJAE* submission been preceded by a rejection from another journal). I also asked for their plans about possible alternatives had the article been rejected by our journal. I was able to contact twenty-one of twenty-six authors by telephone and believe the survey response to be insightful and relevant to how they, and others, view the *WJAE*'s niche among professional journals in agricultural economics.

Of the twenty-six articles, eleven were authored by individuals located in the United States or Canadian West at the time of re-

search. The remaining articles were authored at fourteen nonwestern institutions, plus an international contribution from New Zealand. Table 2 reveals the geographic distribution of authors regarding the question about whether the *WJAE* was their first choice submission or not. Eleven respondents, including one whose article had been rejected elsewhere, indicated that the *WJAE* choice was made because of a western regional identity or focus to their work. Three articles were submissions of work previously presented in WAEA selected papers sections.

Of the five articles previously submitted elsewhere, four had been subjected to *AJAE* reviews and one to a journal of the American Statistical Association. One was subsequently sent to the *WJAE* on reviewer suggestion, one was submitted because of a regional focus, and a third because the topic was similar to one previously published in the *WJAE* and of known interest to the new editors. All of the articles rejected by the *AJAE* but published in the 1986 volume of the *WJAE* were by non-West authors. Perhaps the important thing to note here is not that five of twenty-one articles had been rejected elsewhere but rather that sixteen of twenty-one articles, including eight

of twelve of the articles by non-West respondents, were by authors whose first choice was the *WJAE*.

Respondents identified the *WJAE* as a close substitute for the *AJAE* with respect to quality, though several mentioned that regional journals generally were perceived as less important in merit and promotion evaluations at their institutions. Respondents were very impressed with the quality and speed of the review process. The editors earned kudos for their speedy and professional attention to and the handling of their manuscripts. Respondent comments in addition to those about the western or regional focus of their work, included:

"Best of the regional journals."

"*WJAE* has become a strong alternative to the *AJAE*."

"... least regionally oriented of the regional journals."

"Regional title hurts acceptance of journal in merit and promotion cycle. Next in line to *AJAE*, but more consideration is given in University-level review to Canadian, Australian, and European journals, and to second tier national economic journals."

"Publication in a regional journal has lesser personnel action impact relative to national and international journals. *WJAE* is discounted somewhat. We have to work harder to sell the journal, but can do so on acceptance rate and quality criterion. It takes effort."

"*WJAE* is quite highly thought of, just a bit less than *AJAE*."

Though the *WJAE* is well regarded professionally, it was clear that many authors wished that their personnel decision makers would share the high general esteem for the *WJAE*. Several suggested that an alternative title be considered for the journal. Some were aware of previous association consideration of a possible name change. Others were not.

Fifteen of the twenty-one authors attempted to evaluate the next best publication alternative for their article had it received *WJAE* rejection. The general question posed was: "Identify the next two ranking journals or publication outlets for your article, had it not been published in the *WJAE*." The *Southern Journal of Agricultural Economics* was the next mentioned regional journal (five authors) and the *North Central Journal of Agricultural Economics* was mentioned by two. Several authors thought their next choice might include another regional journal but could not specify which

**Table 2. Geographic Distribution of 1986 *WJAE* Authors and Response to First-Choice Question**

Geographic Location of Authorship	Was the <i>WJAE</i> the First-Choice Journal?			Totals
	Yes	No	NR	
U.S./Canadian West	8	1	2	11
Non-West	8	4	3	15
Totals	16	5	5	26

would be preferred. *Water Resources Research*, *Water Resources Bulletin*, or "an irrigation journal" were named by three authors. Other alternatives, each receiving single mention, included: the *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, *Journal of Human Resources*, *Applied Economics*, *Journal of Agribusiness*, *Journal of Farm Management and Rural Appraisal*, *Journal of Food Distribution*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, and nonspecified real estate (or tax) and economics journals. One author said that the article probably would not have been published elsewhere.

So, whether we like it or not, it appears that we have a journal which enjoys a very strong national drawing. It remains to be seen whether the strong non-West origin of articles evident in the 1986 volume persists (see fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Although the recent predominance of non-western authorship may be taken as proof of the emergence of a reputable national journal, traditional members who would like a stronger emphasis on applied and methodological articles of more specific western interest or focus may lament this development. The removal of the western preference statement, unenforceable as it was for the editorship, apparently convinced many nonwesterners to consider the *WJAE* as a publication outlet. However, many members still feel the need for some mechanism that will give emphasis to western problems or issues. For example, Emery Castle recommended that the journal's focus be returned to the West by renaming it the *Western Journal of Applied Economics* and by emphasizing problems west of the 100th

<sup>1</sup> Thirty-eight percent of the articles in the 1986 volume from the U.S. and Canadian West compares to a 75% average for all preceding volumes (1977-85). However, the relative percentages are influenced by the existence of invited and nonrefereed papers in initial years of the *Journal*.

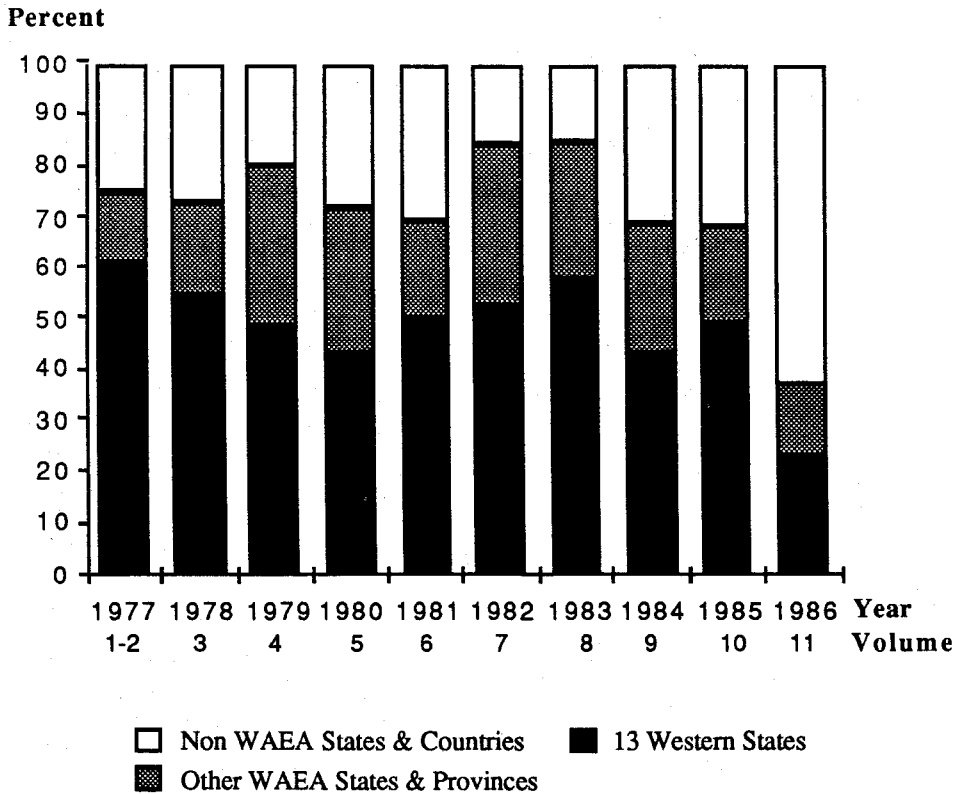


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of *WJAE* authorship

meridian.<sup>2</sup> Other publication alternatives might include reestablishment of a proceedings or an abstracts issue and special invited paper or survey article issues pertaining to western agricultural and natural resources problems and policies. Such additions might be a mechanism to hold western, and western-like, interests in the association and provide benefits to the general membership wider than those currently offered solely by our strong professional journal.

### *The Annual Meetings*

The annual meetings appear to be designed primarily to meet the contributed paper offerings of agricultural economists and tangentially to offer minimal stimulation to the general membership, whether by invited paper sessions or by recent locations of the annual

meetings. As DeLoach noted, some meetings are better than others!

The excitement of the special parts of the program (i.e., invited paper sessions, addresses, and the like) is not communicated to the membership by preannouncement. Who can find out about the nature of a panel or of a well-designed invited paper session in a timely enough manner to develop professional and/or family vacation plans to attend? Most of the membership is precluded from knowing details and making plans to attend on the basis of detailed program content. It may be that attendance is determined primarily by paper selection, secondarily by vacation plans or return to an alma mater, and tertiarily, if at all, by the general program or professional interaction opportunities of a more general sort.

The expansion of the Association to the western two-thirds of the United States and Canada eliminated the geographic proximity that once ensured that the site of annual meetings would not likely exceed a day and a half drive in university or personal vehicles. With

<sup>2</sup> From notes made at the 1986 *WAEA* business meeting in Reno conveyed to the author in a letter dated 5 Aug. 1986.

the geographic dispersion of the Association, the cost of participation in the annual meetings has increased significantly. The willingness-to-pay curve reflects high attendance by selected and invited paper authors and perhaps few others. How can the potential liveliness of annual meetings be communicated to the larger membership?

Participation in annual meetings of both the AAEA and WAEA within thirty calendar days of each other is beyond the travel or meetings budget of most academics. The concern of DeLoach and others about opportunity for interaction appears warranted. A program designed to stimulate wider participation, including that of those in the West who have gained national prominence (but who tend to attend the AAEA meetings), would be invigorating and enriching for all.

A return to more centrally located and attractive sites which include family vacation opportunities could be given more consideration as a means to attract wider participation from the general membership. (Next year's Hawaii experiment may give us some insight into human behavior, but it may be difficult to separate out the geographic proximity from the vacation effects.) Or perhaps a shift in timing of the annual meetings would be advantageous. (For example, a late June meeting could take advantage of fiscal year-end funding or permit both AAEA and WAEA attendance in the same calendar year from two different fiscal year budgets.)

There are still topical issues of the West and policy studies that do not fit well into contributed paper efforts, particularly if attempts are made to examine several facets or all the pros and cons of a particular issue. There is a need to understand these special problems of the West and how they relate to irrigation, energy, transportation, public lands, livestock, interregional and international trade, the Pacific Rim, resource policy, rural development, and the like. A conscientious return to the practice of holding regional research technical or coordinating committee meetings in conjunction with the annual meeting might facilitate wider participation. We could take advantage of local situations to become better informed about regional issues with formal program treatment and, perhaps, include postconference farm and industry tours of the region. A picture is often worth a thousand words, even though the words might be refereed.

I do not mean by these comments to preempt the presidential prerogative in designing and selecting effective elements for programs of the Association's annual meetings. Rather, I am merely suggesting possible avenues of inquiry for consideration by executive boards and the general membership, as we seek to enhance Association benefits for all.

### Concluding Statement

In the sixty years since its establishment, the Western Agricultural Economics Association has evolved through many challenges. The Association was established with clear visions of the need for increased professionalism and better understanding of the region's agricultural and natural resource economies. The western association has gradually drifted away from its western emphasis, even though its constitution still proclaims the primary objective to be "to foster the study and understanding of agricultural economics and its applications to problems in the Western United States."

We continue to search for our niche in the profession, even though there have been serious and considered efforts made throughout our history to meet emerging WAEA challenges and opportunities. There are a range of opinions about the current role and function of this regional Association. The challenge for both current and future Association leadership will be to rationalize the diversity of membership interests into a program (or programs) which provides sustenance for all member participants. To that end, I offer a few conclusions.

I accept the fact that we have a national journal. On balance, that is to our credit. I reject the notion that we are, perforce, a national association. The sought-after niche may well include both regional and national contributions to the profession and even the international contribution. However, the tilt away from a dominant regional perspective should not be at the expense of the primary objective of a western focus or perspective in our professional agricultural economics contributions. An expanded agenda may well accommodate both sets of interests.

I strongly believe that there is still need for both regional and national attention to be focused on significant problems and issues of the West. In that regard, the western association



should give significant forethought to leading informed discussion and research on these problems and issues. To the extent that they may resemble problems and issues elsewhere, national and international members will be served well by such contributions. We should continue to address these in our annual meetings and in our journal or alternative publications.

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