

# RESPONSIBILITIES, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES IN PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION

*Edwin L. Kirby  
Administrator, Extension Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture*

Public policy education as an integral part of our total extension effort has come of age! This annual national conference has been a major factor in expanding and improving the quality of our public affairs education efforts, and all of us appreciate the significant contributions made by the Farm Foundation in helping to support this conference, as well as many other important programs.

The time has come for extension to expand its efforts in public policy education. If we believe in the basic extension education philosophy of "helping people to help themselves," in the basic process of extensive involvement of people in determining extension programs, and in extension's role of assisting people in making sound decisions, then helping people deal with public affairs issues must become a high priority. In the final analysis, citizens will decide issues concerning centralized versus decentralized government control, food and population, environment and safety, energy, transportation, world trade, subsidies versus producing for the open market, rural-urban population balance, employment and other opportunities for improved living in rural United States, and many other matters. Our basic extension role is to provide information to help citizens in understanding the issues, making sound decisions, and getting decisions implemented.

In formulating an expanded and forward looking public policy education program, we must consider appropriate audiences. We cannot effectively reach all people in all aspects of policy education. But what people? Our Extension Service five-year program plan, accepted in principle by the state extension directors and the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy and by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, states that primary emphasis will be given to those people who live outside cities with populations of 50,000 and over. The plan also recognizes the diversity of populations and priorities established among the several states and acknowledges variations expected in clientele served.

Another factor to be considered is the extent to which we de-

pend on representative leaders to multiply the impact of our limited professional resources. The demonstration and “trickle down” process has been well established in our extension efforts. Most states continue to use “tune in to the masses of people through carefully selected leaders” to assist extension professionals in determining and conducting programs. In this process, we must be sure that we have *representative leaders* of the population to be served, including the various economic, ethnic, social, and other groups.

Our five-year program plan contains the following four major priority missions of total extension effort:

1. Provide assistance to families, youth, and community leaders in the development and improvement of rural America to make it a better place in which to live and work.
2. Provide assistance to adults and youth through programs in agriculture and home economics to increase efficiency in production, marketing, and utilization of food and fiber (including forest products) to meet both domestic and worldwide needs.
3. Work with producers and their families to strengthen independent family-owned farming operations to assure a strong competitive agriculture based on the independent farm.
4. Assist both the private and public sectors with protection and management of rural America’s natural resources for use by present and future generations.

Within the framework just discussed, let us consider some more specific issues. We need to note the interrelatedness of the many issues with which we have to deal.

Food policy is a high priority policy topic and one for which we have considerable responsibility within the framework of the missions stated. Food policy considerations cut across almost all extension program areas—agriculture, home economics, community resource development, and 4-H youth programs.

As we consider food issues, you may want to read a paper which your colleague, Harold Breimyer, gave at the recent forum of the American Country Life Association. He suggests that we *not* look at food issues in physical terms of food producing capacity relative to food needs, but that we approach it through a realistic consideration of modern agriculture. Noting that agriculture is half industrial and half agrarian he points to the magnitude of produc-

tive inputs of nonfarm origin. It seems to me that the real significance of the paper is in emphasizing the interrelatedness of policies regarding food, energy, land use, transportation, water, environment, and trade.

We have a strong obligation to continue to give farm policy high priority in our extension public policy programs. The importance of food and fiber to the total welfare of this nation dictates a continuing effort to identify and objectively examine the alternative policies, organizational structures, and economic and social environments in which the food and fiber industry might function.

Foreign agricultural trade will continue to be a very important area of extension public policy education in the next several years. It is generally accepted that the U.S. economy must generate a growing source of international exchange in order to buy critical materials, including oil, from foreign suppliers. Official national policy at present is to place heavy emphasis on gaining and holding export markets for agricultural products. But such a policy conflicts with interests of domestic consumers, who want low-priced food. Heavy reliance on international markets also introduces additional income risks and uncertainties throughout the farming and agribusiness industries. Here again we have interrelationships of issues and a need to compromise in forming a policy.

People need help in reconciling the conflicts and apparent inconsistencies in these policy objectives. The hard choices are made by our clientele, hopefully on the basis of scientific facts and principles. Although we do not make the choices, we still have the responsibility of providing the facts and helping to examine the alternatives and probable consequences. Can we do this objectively? Objectivity to me means more than mere detachment. It means getting the facts and the *alternatives* and possible *consequences* before the extension clientele to enable them to understand and make fully informed decisions.

Let us look briefly at some challenges and opportunities ahead for us. Extension can provide objective public policy education to a large segment of the rural public by supplying a neutral ground for various interests to meet to consider issues. This capability may not be fully utilized at present, largely because we have tended to restrict the conducting of public policy education to a relatively few highly trained specialists. Some have felt that a person must be "seasoned" in extension work for many years before he is to be entrusted with public policy education. This was probably true in earlier years.

Times have changed in policy work as in all other program areas. We have a number of highly effective young policy specialists who would not have been employed for this purpose twenty-five years ago.

The demands of our extension audience for policy education have changed. The audience wants more sophisticated information on a much wider range of issues.

As government crop and acreage control programs have been phased out, we are shifting the emphasis of our policy education programs. We have responded to new challenges. Our programs in rural community development require policy education in land use, local government finance, health care, and a multitude of other areas. At the same time, we must maintain or increase our efforts on food and fiber policy, world trade, and a host of other issues affecting agriculture. Several studies have recommended increased staff and effort in public policy and public affairs education. But inflation hits extension budgets, and state directors have not had sufficient funds to add needed personnel.

The need can be met, in part, through more selectivity in programming public policy education efforts and through the training of present extension personnel. Perhaps we should consider a wider and more formal involvement of our total extension staff in programs of public policy education. Many issues which have a profound effect on our rural audiences are considered and resolved at the local level. Examples are many, including the land use planning issues such as planning and zoning, and local government finance. We have found that these and other areas of policy education can be effectively handled by county staff if they are properly trained.

Training opportunities in public policy education, to date, for extension personnel have been very limited. With the support of the Farm Foundation, we have offered courses at the extension summer and winter schools. The Extension Service, USDA, has recently funded a pilot project in five Western states to provide this training for agents and to observe their operation of public policy programs for a period following their training. We expect this project to provide a procedure for training in public policy education that can be adapted nationwide.

But this is not enough. What I am proposing is that we consider the 16,500 extension staff members as public policy educators in selected areas, rather than the few hundred highly trained state

specialists. We need to be innovative in how best to provide such training.

An ECOP Public Affairs Task Force said in 1969, “Extension’s function in public affairs education is to teach the people it serves so they can analyze public issues on the basis of scientific facts and principles. It is the prerogative of the people themselves to make their own decisions on public affairs issues and express them as they see fit.” That is still an accurate reflection of the extension policy education philosophy. But, we need to consider this additional question: What is our proper concern about what people do with their decisions? Do we have a responsibility to help our audience to more effectively implement the decisions they make?

Decision making as an intellectual exercise is not the end purpose of our educational efforts. The effective implementation of policy decisions toward the accomplishment of audience goals is the appropriate purpose of the effort. If we help people arrive at decisions, but leave them with little understanding about how to implement them through the policy-making machinery, we are likely to wind up with a frustrated audience and limited evidence of the success of our educational efforts.

Do extension workers in public policy have a responsibility to help the people understand the system in which public policy is made? Should we help our audience understand the system of political linkages between the public and its leaders and help them to communicate effectively with policy makers?

A large number of existing power structures exert influence on public policy decisions every day. These include already organized groups on local, state, and national levels. Elected officials react primarily to their constituency, and we need to help extension participants learn how best to work with and through existing groups in getting action.

One of the most critical factors in the success of an extension program is timeliness—taking advantage of the “teachable moment.” We need to watch diligently for this critical time in program execution. As educators, we have a responsibility to “cause changes in desirable directions.” This means having the ability to anticipate changing conditions and being ahead of the issues so that those we teach can help to *formulate* policies.

In closing, let me emphasize the following points:

1. Extension policy education has come of age. In the last

twenty-five years you have brought this program from a questionable undertaking into acceptance, respect, and prestige.

2. Jobs well done are never finished—they get bigger with the doing. You now have the responsibility of giving leadership to public policy education programs affecting our total extension education effort. Motivating and training 16,500 extension staff in how best to conduct public policy education programs is one of our highest priorities. We cannot do it effectively alone.

3. Helping citizens understand the issues and the processes of decision making is a challenge which must be faced. Helping citizens decide on issues is not enough. We have an additional responsibility to help them consider alternative ways of implementing their decisions.

You can be proud of your achievements during these twenty-five years of holding the National Public Policy Education Conference. I am confident that you will continue to expand and improve our extension efforts in this important program.