

THE 1985 FARM BILL AND FUTURE COMMODITY POLICY EDUCATION

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“A great and glorious past does not ordain a similar present or future contribution.”—Unknown wise philosopher.

“Resting on past accomplishments contributes unmagnanimously to the future.”—Unknown wise philosopher.

Some astute observers would claim the author of these statements isn't a philosopher, wise or unknown. But nevertheless, it is my contention that these words have been unheeded by land grant research and extension agricultural policy specialists.

The list of major innovations in agricultural price and income policy from the '30s to the '70s contributed by land grant professionals is indeed impressive: elements of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, soil bank, mandatory supply controls, dairy base plan, set aside, and marketing orders to list a few. The names of George Warren, J. Carol Bottum, Don Paarlberg, Willard Cochrane, John Schnittker, Paul Kelly and Leo Blakeley quickly come to mind.

But what about the Food Security Act of 1985? What did we contribute? Yes, several of us, led by Harold Guither, took an extensive survey of farmers and conveyed those findings to the policymakers. We can even claim we had an impact. Since, as reported in the third quarter 1986 issue of *Choices*, with two exceptions the Food Security Act of 1985 contains provisions favored by most U.S. farmers surveyed in 1984 (Martin, Guither and Spitze). Perhaps the single most important contribution we made was through an idea conceived by R. J. Hildreth of the Farm Foundation that involved land grant agricultural economics in an informative and analytical conference for Congressional staffers.

Let us not play down the importance of surveys and conferences, but where were the innovative ideas? Wait, you will argue about the market-oriented approach, lower loan rates, the marketing loan, PIK certificates and the Dairy-herd Buy-out Program. Many land grant agricultural economists may not wish to claim these. Be that as it may, they didn't come from this fraternity. They came from special

interest groups, political operatives and administrative agency professionals.

The political debate going into the farm bill began two years in advance. It finally centered around the question, should we attempt to control supply or should we attempt to export our so-called over capacity? The essential question that policymakers looked to us for an answer was, What is the elasticity of demand for grains and fiber in an international market? We couldn't answer it. But we did have a great debate between two respected land grant ag economists—G. Edward Schuh and Luther Tweeten.

We conferenced. We issued proceedings. And we conferenced and we issued proceedings. The foundations and the think tanks got into the act. But the conferences were inbred and they didn't exhibit hybrid vigor. They were dispersed throughout the country with the same old faces on the programs. Innovative ideas were scarce and participants were few.

A congressman on the House Agriculture Committee, who spoke at several of the conferences, remarked, "When are professional agricultural policy specialists going to cease speaking and writing for each other, and begin to contribute possible solutions?"

Writing again in the third quarter 1986 issue of *Choices*, a colleague of mine at Kansas State University leveled a very serious indictment: "Research and extension programs at land grant universities with few exceptions are losing credibility as a key source of research and extension information for designing national farm and food policies" (Kelley, p. 31). This was written by a deep thinker who, along with three other land grant economists, cofathered the original dairy base plan.

We have argued, debated, researched and studied double-digit options to solve the so-called farm problem, many of which could contribute to the solution. But only the soil bank of the Benson era remained intact for the long term. Perhaps the "problem" is not the lack of new innovative solutions, but rather that the policy-making process itself is at fault.

For three out of the last five years the Kansas winter wheat farmer went to the field to plant the crop, not knowing what acreage controls, loan rates or target prices would be in effect for that crop year. How can a farmer prudently plan and manage, not knowing the rules of the game when he begins to play? The political planning horizon and the investment decision horizon are out of sync.

Several of us tried to get the policy-making process itself on the agenda. We were met with open arms by special interest groups and political leaders, but we were stonewalled by the "elite professional establishment." A prominent Washington think tank, for example, refused to allow the subject on the agenda of a jointly sponsored fo-

rum with the Agricultural Council of America. The chairman of that group at the time, who also chaired U.S. Wheat Associates, was one of the originators of the idea to study the process itself as a possible cause of the "problem." Needless to say, that didn't contribute to professional credibility within the power cluster. There was little support from the "elite professional establishment" for the study of the policy-making process. The "club" was closed until, through political muscle, a section was written into the farm bill to create a commission to study the process and make recommendations for long-term policy. Now the "club" wants to be involved.

We are following rather than leading. We are reacting to ideas rather than placing new innovative ideas in the hopper of public dialogue. The time has come to dispose of elitism and caution.

The time has come for land grant agricultural policy specialists to use the alternative/consequences model and educate. The time has come for fortitude and the willingness to risk the wrath of special interest groups in the name of establishing fact and contributing new ideas to the dialogue. The time has come for us to be architects rather than custodians.

REFERENCES

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