DISCUSSION: INCREASING FARMERS' UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC PROBLEMS AND POLICIES

RAYMOND J. PENN AND PETER DORNER
University of Wisconsin

"Agricultural Policy" is one of the rapidly expanding fields of agricultural economics. In the 1920's we considered national price policy its main ingredient. Today that subject is at least as important as it was then. Yet it does not dominate the field as it once did. Actually policy has application to the individual farm firm. A farmer has production policies behind his production programs. He has policies with respect to his family's living and education. If policy has any meaning it is the desire and will of people to act on a problem confronting them. On the individual farms, agricultural research and extension has long been active in the area of policy decisions.

The expanding array of problems which we usually place in agricultural policy are those that require group action for solution. Included are such varied areas as county zoning, state fiscal policy, state aids to local units of government, national price programs, land and water development programs, social security, and even international affairs.

Increased emphasis on agricultural policy may foreshadow some real work
by agricultural economists on this matter of group action. The principles and motivating forces of group action are found in an intimate understanding of the problems and people involved, and are much broader than the field in which so many agricultural economists have recently been devoting so much of their time: refinements of the economic theory of the firm.

We find ourselves in substantial agreement with Mr. Bottum's paper and also with the policy extension program underway at Purdue. It should be re-emphasized that the final judgment on a policy question does not rest with the agricultural economist. Rather, it is his job to define the issues in a situation and describe alternatives and their consequences. The economist is in real trouble when he insists that his answer to a policy question is the only "right" answer. Group action requires compromising the judgments of the persons involved (both in and out of agriculture), including those of technicians and public officials.

Mr. Bottum seems to imply that the agricultural economics extension specialist can define issues, describe alternatives and appraise consequences in a completely objective manner without making value judgments. Research or extension without value judgments is particularly sterile for policy questions. The economist must make value judgments in selecting the alternatives for presentation and the consequences expected to ensue from acting upon these alternatives. Although these are value judgments they do not necessarily mean the economist is to inject his own opinions as to the most desirable course to be taken by the group. The procedures necessary to achieve certain consequences and the desirableness of these procedures and expected consequences should be judged only by the group—not the researcher or the teacher.

Furthermore, Mr. Bottum strongly implies that people's "values" are fixed and all judgments therefore are made to harmonize with these previously held values. It is not, it seems to us, a combining of their previously held values with the new beliefs or facts presented, but rather, it has allowed the individuals to form and reconstruct a new set of values. This is, as we constantly experience when we learn something new, the jist of education. If this does not occur, problems and conflict simply cannot be alleviated.

Mr. Bottum's second approach (the economist presenting a position and then finding supporting evidence) is a legitimate scientific method so long as the research worker or the educator is willing to describe the position as an hypothesis to be tested and accept contrary ideas and evidence with an open mind. And the line between this and his fifth and recommended approach (presentation of issues, alternatives, consequences) is not as conveniently antiseptic as we might wish.

Another idea that should be challenged is the belief that farmers (or anyone else for that matter) must choose between freedom and opportunity on the one hand and security on the other. This idea, although loosely held and widely discussed, is not supported by the evidence. John R. Commons formulated a much more realistic idea concerning group action—namely, that a rule restricting an individual's action may be the most important factor in expanding his opportunity and freedom. The choice may be between "security and freedom" or "no security and no freedom."

Now for two ideas not included in Mr. Bottum's paper:
The first idea is that the role of the educator goes beyond simply comparing the obvious alternatives. It includes the creative function of developing new
alternatives and arousing an interest to consider them. Seaman Knapp with his extension demonstration was presenting farmers with another alternative beyond those they had previously recognized. His process of education aimed at raising the level of understanding, thus creating a willingness to include the subject of the demonstration as a new and acceptable alternative for consideration. The teacher's job is selecting alternatives and consequences for presentation, but, in addition, it is the presentation of ideas (theoretical principles) that guided him in his selections. Only in this way can the group understand how it is that these are real alternatives. This will also permit them to think more fruitfully on their own when future problem situations arise. And education is certainly incomplete if this has not occurred.

The current emphasis of the agricultural economist—both research and extension—upon presenting alternatives may well include this function. If a certain kind or amount of education is needed to enable farmers to choose wisely among alternatives, then we need to recognize this too in our policy programs. This must be done with considerable caution for, unless we carefully follow an educational process in expanding the understanding of and desire to consider new alternatives, we will certainly bring extension under criticism, as has sometimes been the case in the past, for deciding what is good for farmers and telling them to do it.

The second idea, although implicit in parts of Mr. Bottom's paper, is that farmers, like others, are most receptive to information when they are faced with a decision. There is plenty of evidence on this point. Interest of Wisconsin farmers in national price support programs was almost double in 1954 (an election year) what it has been in 1955. In a summer when hay crops came on fast and haying weather was poor, Wisconsin farmers snapped up 50,000 copies of a grass silage circular which previously had aroused only moderate interest. The importance of such examples is that agricultural policy extension will probably make its greatest contribution with specific groups (and individuals as a part of those groups) who are contemplating some action.

We need extension and research "approaches" for working effectively with such groups on policy matters. How do we work with cooperative groups who are forming a butter selling agency? Farm organizations on price policy issues? County Boards of Supervisors on forest management issues? State natural resources commissions and other state and federal agencies on issues of concern to agriculture?

The "approaches" must, of course, be patterned to fit different situations, and we will not detail them here. However, educators have demonstrated that they can work in this area. One thing an educator needs is a desire to understand the problems of the group and to make his ideas and materials available in the genuine hope that group action will be benefited. Another is a willingness to be of service, within the scope of his competence, to all groups that are acting on matters important to agriculture. He need not accept the value judgments of the group to be of service to it. Nor need he feel that they should accept his. Groups do not want agreeable technicians except for advertising programs. They want teachers with ideas and information on what to do about their problems.