

More Analytical and Responsible Reporting Needed in Agriculture

Ralph Reynolds

This is a fine honor and I am indeed pleased to receive the Reuben Brigham award from ACE.

What a great man he was, and what a super idea he had: To install at major sites of agricultural research, skilled editors and journalists who could inform the public about the results of that research.

When I was a freshman in English comp at New Mexico A & M, a somewhat cynical teacher made us write a theme on the subject "Universities and colleges are full of knowledge. Freshmen bring a little in and seniors take none away, so knowledge accumulates."

Anyway, one would expect scientific knowledge to accumulate at research-minded institutions of higher education, especially at universities as vigorous and mission-oriented as the Land-Grant system. But this doesn't happen in America, at least in agriculture. Knowledge doesn't just stack up in cobwebby ivory towers in this country. As soon as knowledge is generated it has been quickly disbursed and disseminated into technology.

I think this quick transfer of information is an invention of the American system. One sees it in all fields of science, but it has been especially notable in agriculture, thanks largely to our highly developed extension systems.

I might add that the most active and efficient segment of that

Reynolds, winner of the ACE Reuben Brigham Award, is executive editor of The Furrow. That is the United States edition of the worldwide farm magazine, published in nine languages by Deere & Company and its subsidiaries.

extension is composed of the people who pay dues to the Agricultural Communicators in Education. I see evidence of this several times a week right on my desk beside the Webster's Unabridged Dictionary: a pile of news releases about twice its thickness.

I am well aware that magazine editors and associations of magazine editors often speak of news releases in belittling or distasteful terms, as if they carry a bacillus that threatens to contaminate the editorial office. Special sessions and seminars are sometimes held to deal with The Problem: What can we do about these damned news releases?

Sophocles had advice for editors so concerned: "Though a man be wise, it is no shame for him to live and learn." My own advice is less inspired and certainly less inspiring: The thing to do about news releases is to read them. I do and so does every Furrow editor. We'd have an awful time keeping up with what's going on in agriculture if we didn't read those news releases. Of course we print some of them and some we put into researched stories or follow-up with the original source. But we also use news releases to keep ourselves informed. That helps us do a better job for readers.

Last week, I interrupted the writing of this speech to go through a batch that was smaller than usual. (I guess extension editors were taking vacations thereby giving magazine editors one.) Here are some of the things I found and learned: A windfall of releases from South Dakota, where the editors are obviously not on vacation, tells about beef prices, bindweed, greenbugs, and pasture systems; Michigan State announces an important new study on energy use. A Wyoming release reveals that a modern homemaker is now worth more than \$17,000 a year. (Unhappily, they neglected to tell how you go about selling one). The University of Illinois sends an analysis of current grain stocks (what a job the U. of I. does on farm economics). There are two of those neat multi-subject releases from Missouri. Virginia Tech. tells about upcoming farm tours. Ohio State sends an outstanding release on erosion and another with a new twist about capital gains. Their good magazine is in the pile too with a crisp write-up on the new Elf soybeans which we're interested in. USDA is well represented with releases from Washington, Madison, Berkeley, and, of course, Ed Curran's always interesting Farm Paper Letter, plus the "Farmers Newsletter." Oklahoma State's magazine has an important lead story about plant fusion. There are several releases from EPA including an important announcement about experimental clearance of cotton insecticides. The really fine and always welcome "Cornell Recommends" is in the pile and so is the Federal Reserve Bank's "Agricultural Letter" with some surprising information about imports-exports. The pile also includes informa-

tive releases from The Countryside Council, the National Corn Grower's Association, the Nebraska Center for Rural Affairs, High Plains Water District, Illinois Department of Agriculture, the University of Kentucky, National Cotton Council, University of Guelph, and the Canada Department of Agriculture, Webb Company, Exxon, Funk Seeds, ASAE, even Senator Lugar of Indiana (the latter urging more study of burning corn for fuel).

Now, that didn't take long. Most releases are skillfully written for quick reading. I was well repaid for a small investment in time. I was also entertained as well as informed by one "release" from CAST, which you may know as the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology. It was actually a copy of a letter from Iowa State's Charles A. Black, executive vice president of CAST, addressed to Under Secretary of Agriculture, Rupert Cutter.

In his letter, Dr Black sets forth a stout defense of 2, 4, 5-T, the "Agent Orange" herbicide of Vietnam. Some war veterans believe long-range effects of the chemical are now hurting their health.

Dr. Black's letter also alludes to military use of potassium nitrate. As you may recall, this infamous salt was believed to be a sexual tranquilizer that the army was feeding the troops. I guess it was all true. I remember Bob Hope telling a G.I. audience about a tough first sergeant in the South Pacific who ingested so much of the stuff for so long that he began addressing his wife in letters as "Dear Friend." Now, Bob Hope wouldn't lie.

Anyway, Dr. Black passes along the following story from another source: It seems that "John and Paul, who were buddies in World War I were later employed in the same factory in the United States. One day, about 30 years after they were mustered out of the Army, John came upon his friend sitting disconsolately beside the machine he operated. The machine was running properly, and all seemed in order. John asked his friend what was wrong. 'You know, Paul,' he said, 'we have been good friends all these years. If there's anything wrong about the conditions here in the factory or if there are any other problems I can help you with, you know I'll do everything I can to help you out.'

"Paul hesitated a moment and then said, 'John, do you remember that salt-peter they used to put in our food in France to keep our mind on fighting the war?' 'Yes,' said John, 'I do.'

'Well,' said Paul, 'I think it's beginning to get to me.'"

Levity and analogy aside, Dr. Black wrote a well-documented and persuasive defense of 2, 4, 5-T. After reading his letter, I'm convinced that it would be foolish to deny agriculture the use of this valuable chemical. Let me add quickly that I've learned to make up my mind about chemicals on a case-by-case basis.

Isn't it a shame that people, even scientists of talent, training, and

integrity, no longer have the credibility they used to have. Something has gone haywire with our credibility system when editors and others interested hardly dare take expert opinions and proceed with them. Instead, we have to examine all the data and evidence and make up our own minds. I think the problem is that lots of convincing people with credentials are being governed by their emotions. They are allowing wits and gut feelings to substitute for information, analysis and rational thought.

To some small but important extent, science seems to be on an emotional kick, and this is not a good trend. Lane Palmer, editor of Farm Journal, claims that our society is generating and spreading myths and folklore faster than it's producing and disseminating new knowledge. You know, I think Lane is right. There's too much prejudice, superstition and stereotyping around. Lane calls for a return to respectability of the scientific method.

Agriculture, successful as it is, is beset by critics. Some consumers say agriculture is insensitive to their needs and tastes. Some labor groups view farmers as crass and selfish. Some conservative elements in society (and I use the word "conservative" concretely) complain that modern agriculture is too industrial, too technical, uses too much energy, is too lacking in human values, too inclined to squander resources or to pollute environments. Some ultra-conservatives in society seem to be telling us that agriculture should go back to the way it was 40 or 50 years ago.

Agriculture can and will conserve energy, redefine its human values, respond to consumer needs, reduce careless losses of precious resources and stop polluting soil and water. These things agriculture can do. What it cannot do is step backward to the way it was half a century ago.

It is a pity and more, it is a human tragedy, that so many millions of farm families were forced out of agriculture in the past 40 years. And it is well to remember that the cause of this exodus was economic, not technological. Even so, having been forced out, those individuals and families cannot be forced or wedged back in. There is no possibility that agriculture could muster the human resources to farm the way we used to.

As agricultural communicators, we have to direct our attention to the surviving farmers. And what an incredible audience they are! And how they've changed! Let's take the million or so who produce almost all of our food and fiber. These are the kind of people that Chester Teller calls agri-facturers in his good paper in the latest **AAACE Quarterly (now ACE Quarterly)**.

As a group, they're highly educated. They own or control the largest area of private real estate in this rich nation. In terms of assets, many are millionaires, and a very large number of them might

be considered well heeled in any company. They spend more money, by far, than would the audience of any non-farm magazine I know of. And as purchasers of business inputs they would probably be exceeded only by purchasing agents for large firms. They get around and travel. They socialize a lot. They have leisure time and they use it in imaginative ways. They're turned-on, exciting, interesting people. They also read a great deal and spend a lot of time learning.

As communicators, what is our role in serving this kind of audience? In the old days, it was easy to empathize with a poor and struggling farmer who was sometimes semi-ignorant, who needed know-how to make his life easier, better and more secure, and to get ahead. It was not difficult to be idealistic about our work. That kind of farmer needed us, but what of this affluent, businesslike, sophisticated, self-reliant modern farmer?

He needs us too. He needs our information to solve the myriad of problems already mentioned, and those that lie ahead. He needs our ideas and inspiration for progress in agriculture. He needs our sponsorship for his causes and our spokesmanship for his frustrations and troubles. Especially, he needs our support in a social and political environment which finds him very much a minority.

Agriculture needs communicators now more than it ever did. And our job will maybe be tougher in the future than it was in the past. Our audience is more demanding and discerning on the one hand and more vulnerable to public opinion on the other.

In the future the farm press and all those serving agriculture with information will need to be more analytical, responsible, professional, and attentive than ever. We will need to use our intelligence and skills to benefit agriculture. We will have to care about our audience and be ready to stand up for farmers and fiercely defend them when they need us. That seems to me our professional mission. And it seems quite enough.

Referring to the ancient diversion and unfortunate modern business of raising fight cocks, Plutarch is supposed to have said, "I don't want a rooster that will die fighting. I want a rooster that will kill fighting."

Plutarch had a profound sense of duty, destiny, objective, or call it profession. The task of a fighting cock is not necessarily to live or to die but to kill. If there are killers among us tonight, they're only killers of bombast, pretention, and superfluous adjectives and commas. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to ask: What is our own sense of profession? Most of us are institutional editors (I didn't say institutionalized, though perhaps many of us should be). That means we are paid by employers whose principle business or objective is **not** communications.

I like to call myself an editor, and the title connotes a professional responsibility to serve an audience. I am grateful that my own employer, Deere & Company, places a very high value on professionalism, because I believe strongly that a person can best serve his employer by honoring his profession.

My profession is to communicate with farmers. Of course, that's a large part of yours too, but it does seem appropriate to have changed the name of AAACE for one special reason: A very great responsibility of many members of ACE is teaching. And some of the finest teachers I've known are members. I'll mention only a few: Dick Powers, who taught me most of what I know about science writing; Bry Kearn, the kind of teacher who inspires legends; Jim Evans, who never taught me but I wish he had. One who did teach me is Lloyd Bostian, who is here tonight. Lloyd can program a computer quicker than I can write a lead sentence. Others are Claron Burnett, Mellie McCannon, and Maurice White. These people will be remembered as teachers long after they—and I—have been forgotten as editors.