

Reaching Out with Outlook Information

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Reaching a large number of agricultural producers, the agricultural business/financial community and the public with agricultural outlook information sounds like one of those grandiose educational ideas that never have much reality beyond the pages of the annual plan of work. However, in the three Pacific Northwest states (Washington, Idaho and Oregon), this idea has a great deal of reality. It's called the *Pacific Northwest Agricultural Situation and Outlook* report. The report is issued annually as a 16-page tabloid insert in the biweekly farm magazine for each of the three states. It runs in the first edition of the new calendar year and is the basis for advance spinoffs for the news media in both written and audio form.

Preparation

Preparation involves 40 to 50 faculty members at the University of Idaho, Oregon State University, and Washington State University. Some are classroom teachers, some are Extension specialists, and some are county Extension agents. They serve as writers or reviewers of 16 to 18 articles covering a wide range of commodities and general subjects, such as international trade or the outlook for production inputs. A coordinating committee of three Extension economists, one from each state, leads the effort. Chairmanship rotates from state to state each year. The effort also involves publications, news, and broadcast personnel in the three states.

The publications unit in the chairing state edits the report. The copy is received electronically from the three campuses and several outlying offices. All three states have electronic mail/computer linkups that can interface. The articles are edited and sometimes trimmed to fit available space, then sent electronically to the headquarters for the *Farmer-Stockman* group, which publishes biweekly state farm magazines for six western states.

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The magazine's production staff handles typesetting, final makeup, and proofreading. The headquarters are in Spokane, Washington, so a university editor can give the proof a final check when Washington or Idaho are the lead states; Oregon is too remote. The newsprint insert is then run on the presses of the two Spokane daily newspapers, using ROP second color. It reaches magazine subscribers two weeks after the edited copy is wired in.

Story Use Extensive

At the same time, the edited articles are delivered to the three university agricultural news units. Each state prepares its own news releases to fit local conditions and maximize story use. Story use has been extensive. Outlook information has a number of news values—new, current, important, local, authoritative. The widespread usage is also due in some part to the need to fill the news hole that occurs right after Christmas. The smaller dailies print all or parts of the releases with little rewriting. The metro press uses the copy as the springboard for its own rewrites. The agriculture college radio news services also prepare written and audiotape spinoffs, featuring actualities with the experts who wrote the articles.

The complexity of Pacific Northwest agriculture means that a large number of articles and releases are needed. The 1986 outlook report, issued the first week in January, dealt with a whole catalog of commodities: wheat and feed grains, dry peas, lentils, hay and forage, grass seed, apples, pears, small fruits, nuts, vegetables, potatoes, sugarbeets, dry beans, onions, beef cattle, hogs, sheep, poultry, seafood, dairy, forest products, and nursery products. General articles covered the financial crisis in agriculture, the general economy, international trade, and the outlook for farm production inputs.

Less Than 8 Cents

The direct cost for the 16-page tabloid insert is less than 8 cents per copy. For this, the universities receive total control of contents and appearance plus delivery to each of the magazine's 70,000 subscribers in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. The cost is shared on the basis of circulation in each state.

The Pacific Northwest outlook project began with the 1976 edition and has evolved in several stages. The impetus came from the agriculture deans and agricultural economics chairs at the three schools, who wanted to share resources and selected outlook work as one of the major cooperative projects in Extension. Early copies were printed in the Pacific Northwest Extension publication series; they were 24-page booklets available through county Extension offices. Press runs never exceeded 15,000 copies, with direct costs of up to 30 cents per copy. These costs do not include distribution and mailing.

During the early years, successful experience with spinoff news stories convinced the three states of the value of the news tie-in, although it took several years to establish a three-state effort.

The outlook project was switched to magazine inserts beginning with the 1984 edition. The *Farmer-Stockman* magazines have the broadest farm and agribusiness audience in the region. They could provide a much larger audience, a turnaround time that equaled the Pacific Northwest schedule, and the benefit of delivery to the individual reader—all at a lower cost per copy, although total costs went up.

Radio news coverage was added in Washington and Idaho for the 1985 and 1986 editions via toll-free, dial-in services. The 1986 insert was the first to be produced electronically rather than from hard copy, greatly simplifying typesetting and proofing.

Tom Henry, *Farmer-Stockman* editor, likes being able to offer the outlook insert to his Pacific Northwest readers. He mentions specifically the number of favorable comments his editors receive when in the field. However, the insert has its own visual identity, and should retain strong identification for the three sponsoring universities.
