

State Opinion / Policy Leaders

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THERE IS AN OBVIOUS problem in putting together a summary about state opinion/policy leaders. In the absence of a sample survey, there are just too many people involved to safely make generalizations.

Having pointed out that generalizations can't be safely made, I am now going to make some.

You have already heard, or you probably know, what is happening to agriculture today. Rural outmigration, farm consolidation, legislative redistricting requirements, and other such events are the trend of the times. It is pretty well agreed that we are going to have fewer farmers as an audience for research and extension information.

This doesn't necessarily mean a reduction in information staffs just because there are fewer farmers. I dare say, for example, that a large non-farm audience is quite anxious for any information we produce about corn leaf blight.

If we can agree that the agricultural industry will continue as a viable economic activity, then we have an audience with a need to be informed. But today we do have some stereotypes about the impact of what is happening in agriculture.

The political vultures are circling over the emaciated, stumbling body of the farm bloc vote. Its vitality is sapped by outmigration and vital organs receive mortal blows from *Reader's Digest* articles and legislative budget cutters.

The altar of the family farm is desecrated by incorporation papers as suburbia marches outward over still steaming piles of solid waste. Words like "bedroom communities" and "regional growth

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centers" are prominent in professional papers but softly spoken if at all in rural meetings.

In the midst of all the confusing changes, we **busily concentrate on what agriculture is losing rather than what it is becoming.**

This is a key point that surfaced from discussions with agricultural, political, and educational leaders in my state. In my opinion, these leaders showed an encouraging recognition of what is happening in agriculture. Not that they fully agree with what is happening, but generally they recognize possibilities in the new alliances.

There is a Diffusion of Leadership

Agricultural policy is spoken by many tongues. Sometimes the recommendations from competing farm groups are so contrasting you wonder if they are talking about the same farmers. Take a look at what some of the organizations are saying with regard to pending legislation for farm labor organization. Who is really leading?

"Public policy about agriculture is formed at the grocery store cash register," said one person I interviewed. He went on to add, "At times I think the insensitive public is more interested in an uninterrupted lettuce supply than adequate wages for lettuce pickers."

"Local farm leaders are getting more and more frustrated and confused about their ability to influence change," an area extension agent told me. "It's harder to get them out to meetings when they think others don't care."

Who Makes Agricultural Policy?

This is an obvious question when one discusses policy leaders as an audience for extension information. Of particular note these days is the cry that political redistricting is going to destroy the farm bloc vote.

"We have had legislators representing areas with farmers," one extension administrator told me, "but a minority of the legislators are actually farmers." He pointed out that lawyers generally predominate among professions in the legislature, followed by businessmen and then by farmers.

The same generalization could probably be made on a national scale even for the "golden years" of the farm bloc. My point is

that we must have faith in the ability of legislators to become informed about public issues and needs. Then, we must have faith in their adherence to their pledges to legislate for "all the people." This approach may be a bit naive but it is the one I use in dealing with legislators in our state. I think it is the right way.

Does Anyone Really Like Agriculture?

Agriculture's public image has always involved those of us in communications. From pork week to dairy month the stories go out (819,000 in 1968), but we continue to worry about what people think about agriculture. Perhaps we worry a little too much.

A 1966 American Dairy Association national study concluded that:

1. Farmers are not generally considered responsible for high food prices but middlemen are.
2. Farmers are no longer considered as too powerful in Congress or state legislatures—if they ever were.
3. The public has a better image of farmers as being efficient, progressive businessmen than farmers themselves do.

Gene Moody, former associate extension editor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, investigated the charges of "bad press" and "bad public relations" for agriculture voiced in her state. Among her conclusions:

1. Accusations of "bad press" should cease. Otherwise, as antagonism breeds antagonism, fancy may become fact.
2. Newspaper publishers in Virginia have no hostility toward agriculture.
3. The publishers' opposition to certain agricultural legislation and programs cannot be construed as hostility to agriculture per se.

A 1970 poll in Minnesota came up with these urban responses:

1. Farmers get too much of their income from government subsidy payments: 36 per cent agree, 44 per cent disagree, 20 per cent no opinion.
2. Agriculture plays a vital role in Minnesota's economy: 93 per cent agree, four per cent disagree, three per cent no opinion.
3. Farmers have contributed substantially to the increase in food prices: 21 per cent agree, 75 per cent disagree, 4 per cent no opinion.

Robert Rupp, editor of *The Farmer* magazine, points out that New Jersey residents placed farmers third as contributors to their well-being. Delaware and Missouri consumers think they're spending a higher percentage of income for food but in neither state are these supposedly high prices laid at the farmer's doorstep. He concluded . . . "so we have a contradiction—farmers are a minority group, poorly represented—yet prejudices may not bear out in fact."

How Does The State Legislature Feel?

Rodney Searle is an influential man in Minnesota. He is chairman of the Education Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee of the state legislature. In a recent speech he said:

"Since my first legislative session, I have been part of a fast changing governmental scene: From one of strong rural legislative dominance to one of recognized urban voice to the present stage of forced adherence to population that will sound the death knell of rural legislative control. . . . I do hope that when the chronicle of the second 100 years of this state is written it will show that rural people and their problems were treated with the same fairness and farsightedness that urban-suburban citizens were given in the first century.

"The rural image is not one-dimensional, and it is not easy to define. I dare say if we were to ask all nonrural legislators to define rural image we would receive many answers. Because the role of the federal government in agriculture looms so dominant, it is difficult for most nonrural legislators to be interested in or understand the problems. The biggest single factor affecting agriculture is economics, and Washington controls the answer to that puzzle. What little is left for state legislatures to effect serves only as an added irritant."

He went on to point out that the greatest impact of the state legislature on agriculture was through the budget of the university. And he added that over the last three biennia the legislature had appropriated more dollars for agricultural related activities than were requested by university administration. "City legislators," Searle said, "were surprised and pleased to learn that the two most metropolitan counties have the largest enrollment of 4-H youngsters."

How Does Agribusiness Feel About Its Role?

The processing, wholesaling, and retailing segment of the food and fiber industry is a \$115 billion business. Agricultural extension and research activities continue to play an important role for agribusiness. University research still has unique capabilities not duplicated elsewhere. Extension educational programs are especially important for the small businessman fighting for survival in a competitive market.

Agribusiness suffers from criticism from two sides. First, the consumers cite the "middleman" as the profit taker. Second, the farm producers generally feel that the "middleman" could do more about raising product purchase prices.

Agribusiness has an important stake in supporting agricultural policies that will provide them with inputs needed for their market function. In many states there are stories to be told, but not quoted, of how agribusiness representatives helped legislators understand the need for new university agricultural research facilities and extension appropriations.

Future policy decisions relating to agriculture will come under increasing agribusiness influence. Extension communication with this group will be even more important to provide them with decision making information and research findings.

Social responsibility is more frequently mentioned these days, especially with regard to rural industrialization and other programs to maintain rural living patterns. Extension programs for rural development will continue to increase involvement with business in cooperative programs.

Government Agency Personnel in Rural Areas

"The only leadership we have in this town are the younger men from government agencies," the area development worker told me. "The trouble is that they can only push so far before stumbling over their own agency policies, then they have to pull back."

My information is correct in the analysis. Some of the best educated and energetic leadership talent in rural areas receives a salary check from a government agency. For various reasons the several agencies in a community may have policy objectives and procedures that are somewhat uncoordinated with each other. Additionally, the agency procedure may not be the most appropriate one for a particular community.

"How many golf courses has your organization worked on?" I asked.

"Don't publicize that because it looks like there's a lot of public criticism of such things," my friend replied. He missed my point that the golf courses helped round out the area facilities and added to income from tourism. But he was sensitive to the opinion of people who didn't understand the rationale for his work.

Employees of federal, state, and local agencies may live and work in the same community and deal with the same clientele group. But all too often there is a lack of communication and coordination and there may even be open hostility.

Many of us saw this when the Office of Economic Opportunity became active in rural areas. A rural poor family might find itself receiving visits and assistance from the local welfare agency, the local office of Economic Opportunity Community Action Program, and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program.

The Office of Economic Opportunity usually has an excellent file of information about the poor and their needs, just as the welfare office has its own files and information.

When we talk about extension attempting to reach the opinion leaders in working with problems of the poor, we find ourselves facing a multiplicity of agencies with differing demands for assistance and information.

Do Volunteer Leaders Have a Following?

I detect a rising level of frustration on the part of elected and volunteer leaders in rural areas. The rug is being pulled out from under them and they don't have enough tacks to nail it down.

The tacks in this case are people—population is declining and there are fewer people to do things that might attract industry and save communities.

"This is the second meeting today and the third in two days," said the gray-haired farmer. He kicked off his snow boots and joined his fellows in the carpeted conference room of the rural electric cooperative.

Several others hailed his entry and one friend joked, "It seems the same people meet in different places and end up talking about the same things." He was right. Many had been together in other meetings during the week, talking about recreational develop-

ment, county fair planning, and now tonight resource conservation and development.

The business started on time and discussions and votes were handled with the dispatch of veterans. But where were the young men I wondered? Those here tonight were uniformly older, obviously accustomed to working together, and aware of their place in the organization.

The presentation that evening dealt with power structure. They listened attentively to my presentation of initiators, legitimizers, and so forth. But then I questioned, "Does the community know that you came out on a cold evening to meet here—does anybody really care about what you are doing?"

"Hell, no!" was the answer that shot back. "People in this community couldn't care less what this or most other groups decide about anything."

"He's right," said another, "we want this community to survive and grow but we don't know how to get them interested in getting off their tails and doing something." "We're not leaders, we're just a bunch of guys running around having meetings," added another.

The meeting ended on a pessimistic note and I could offer little to cheer them up. These are the leaders who feel isolated. The group told me that the only way to get any action on projects was to send someone to the state offices of various agencies or even to Washington. Then if they were lucky, something might happen.

This same kind of leader in another community objected to an extension program designed to train young people in rural areas how to interview for jobs and how to survive in the "World of Work." "You are just trying to attract more of our young people from our community," one man charged. "What we want is help in providing an opportunity for them to stay here."

Politicians in rural areas face increasing service costs which result in higher taxes levied on a shrinking tax base. This is not a popular action. At the same time they perceive a forthcoming loss of local autonomy resulting from mandatory regionalization of government and service.

We had a near riot in rural Minnesota recently. It wasn't about low farm prices and it wasn't a mob demanding food stamps and welfare checks. It was an angry group of people surrounding the

rural home of a county commissioner. They demanded—and received—his agreement to rescind his vote approving the formation of a state economic region in their area.

The attorney general ruled his decision was made under duress and the economic region was designated over the objections of the vocal group. No wonder the rural leaders sometimes feel as though they are participating in a losing game. "First they closed the schoolhouse and next the courthouse," is a phrase often repeated.

Extension's role in all of this change is not clearly defined in the minds of many people. "Now let's get this straight," the county commissioner growled. "I want to know why the extension home agent is going to work with poor in the county when we are already paying for welfare and public health people. If we want another social worker, we can get one at a lower salary than we are paying the home agent."

If you were the extension supervisor in that meeting, how would you answer the question of the confused commissioner?

Extension and Research Communication With Policy/Opinion Leaders

At the outset of this paper I stated, "We busily concentrate on what agriculture is losing rather than what it is becoming." As communicators I think we will play a key role in what agriculture becomes. Let's look at some of the encouraging statements that came out of my discussions.

1. New economic alliances within the agricultural industry will continue to have legislative impact. Consumer interest in agricultural efficiency and product quality will have more influence

2. Extension efforts in expanded nutrition, home economics, and youth work will attract increasing urban support from citizens and legislators.

3. Federal policy to slow down rural outmigration will increase resource availability for rural areas. Large cities plagued by incoming numbers of unskilled migrants will support programs to help rural residents stay where they are. Urban legislators are increasingly aware of this possibility.

4. As farm voting power is reduced, more effort will be directed towards building up economic power. The multiplicity of geo-

graphically dispersed producers hindered many previous efforts, but production is now becoming concentrated in fewer but larger units. The regional dairy cooperatives are an example of this coming trend.

5. Extension faces the problem of developing and informing new leadership in rural areas but it will not become a promotion agency. There is a tremendous need, for example, to develop leadership among the rural poor so they can work toward solving their own problems. To these kinds of things, extension will demand and receive additional resources in the future. Communications will be a big part of this expansion.

6. There will be an increasing need for extension communications to be directed towards legislators, industry leaders, and commodity producers. The information needs of each group are unique and will require more specialized communicators to serve the target audiences.

Conclusions

I have tried to strike an optimistic note, although I readily admit it takes a lot of stretching to keep your feet on the ground while your head is in the clouds.

We are all caught up in the changes of agricultural structure and some of these changes threaten long-standing positions and habits. The tried and true leaders with whom we have felt so comfortable are fading from the scene . . . the word "agricultural" has been dropped from the title of some extension services.

The new breed of opinion and policy leader is young, well educated, and demanding. As communicators we face this leadership transition—hopefully with optimism and ability to adapt to needs.