

Communications-Public Relations Aspects of Agricultural Pollution

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AS WE ENTERED the 1970's, concern over the quality of our environment — only 10 years ago singled out by John F. Kennedy as a "politically dead" issue — became, with unprecedented suddenness, a public crusade.

All sectors of society are involved: private citizens of all ages and political persuasions, public and private agencies and organizations, the universities, agriculture, business and industry, labor unions, the press, and all levels of government. President Nixon devoted fully a third of his January 1970 state of the union address to environmental issues. Private groups from the Girl Scouts to the John Birch Society to radical student organizations are campaigning for clean air and clean water.

The media have exploited the issue for all it is worth: virtually every national magazine from *Life*, *Time*, *Look*, and *Newsweek* to *The Saturday Review* to *Sports Illustrated* has run a special issue on ecology and the environment; TV specials and public service spots proliferate; the underground press is as articulate in denouncing pollution as it is in protesting the war and racism; and it's almost impossible to pick up an issue of *The New York Times* that does not contain at least one news story or editorial on pollution.

Media Will Pay Less Attention

With some exceptions, I believe the mass media have been doing a good job, even though, in my opinion, they have been going overboard in their "crusade" in recent months. I am sure it will not last. Before long they will change their course. They

won't neglect the topic, but they won't give it as much attention. In this connection, I am reminded of an article in the July 24, 1970, issue of *Life* magazine. It commented on the cause of highway beautification that in the "days of Lady Bird" suddenly became popular with conservationists and political leaders in every state. The magazine sent a correspondent and a photographer throughout the nation to see what had happened over the past five years. The result? Very little if any improvement, and, even worse, "nobody they met seemed to care." Now, I am sure the quality of the environment is a much bigger issue than highway beautification, but my point is that interest in it will not always be at such a high pitch in the mass media. Whether this is good or bad is a matter for debate.

So far, the thrust of the crusade has been against urban and industrial pollution. I have reviewed most of the major magazines, *The New York Times*, and the TV network specials since the first of the year (1970). Except for the long-standing controversy over pesticides, little attention has been paid by mass media or the public to agricultural waste and the pollution it causes — despite the fact that agricultural waste is high on the list of major contributors to pollution. But as cities and suburbs continue to sprawl into rural areas and as single farming operations (especially dairying in our area) become even larger, this situation is bound to change.

Ever since Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, opposition to indiscriminate use of pesticides has been mounting, and a recent editorial in *The New York Times* advocating the immediate suspension of DDT, rather than the proposed gradual phasing out by 1971, is a good example of how an original demand by a small minority can become institutionalized. In the years to come, other types of agricultural pollution will be more involved: contamination of the air and water by livestock waste, odors, agricultural burning, food processing, fertilizer and nutrient runoff, and so forth.

Fortunately, we have a little time to prepare ourselves for the public relations problems we can expect to face. Actually, "public relations" — or even "public information" — is perhaps a poor term to use, as the problem is more properly one of communication among such diverse groups as farmers, suburban homeowners, lake property owners, fishermen, hunters, bird lovers, researchers, food processors, and governmental agencies on all levels.

Emphasize the Positive

The clearest task to identify, of course, is that of informing each of our many publics of what the actual contributions of agriculture are to pollution and what steps are being taken to correct this. Without minimizing the seriousness of the problem, we need to emphasize the **positive** actions being taken by farmers, as well as the economic and technological difficulties involved. It has to be made clear that in some cases effective solutions are just not possible, as research has not yet caught up with the problems; in other cases, solutions are prohibitively expensive even for large-scale operators unless some type of public assistance is available.

But this is just the beginning of the communications problem. Often it is just as necessary to educate the farmers as to inform our other publics. While many food producers and processors are aware of the environmental hazards created by their operations and are anxious to eliminate them, others take a defensive approach when pressure is applied. If neighbors complain about the pollution they are creating, they claim prior use of the land; since they were there first, it is the community's problem, not theirs. This kind of attitude, of course, is bound to create a serious barrier to fruitful communications and good public relations. The last thing we need is to polarize the country over the issue of pollution, as it has been polarized over issues such as the war and civil rights. When planning a public relations program involving agricultural waste in an urban environment, agriculture should never forget that public interest is the paramount interest and to go counter to it will be disastrous in the long run.

Farmer Brought to Court

Some case histories are in order here. First, let us look at the case of Alexander Gorniakowski, a Schenectady County, New York, hog farmer who was cited in 1968 by the State Health Department for violating the Air Pollution Code. After a public hearing, at which citizens' complaints were heard, and an inspection of the operations by the Health Department, Gorniakowski was charged with polluting the air with odors which interfered with the comfortable enjoyment of life and property in the surrounding area. He was ordered to eliminate the smell, confine it to his farm, or to cease operations. The decision was a precedent-

making one, as it was the first time the Air Pollution Code had been used against agriculture.

That was just the beginning. The New York Farm Bureau immediately protested the decision on the grounds that it "set a very dangerous precedent of determining what odors are offensive and therefore what businesses may stand or fall on that determination." With the help of other agricultural organizations, the Farm Bureau obtained an injunction against the decision which permitted Gorniakowski to continue operations until a higher court ruling was obtained. Last January, the State Supreme Court heard the case and ruled that there had been no valid basis for determining that Gorniakowski's operation was actually polluting the air, and the original decision was reversed.

Victory for Agriculture?

This new ruling was seen as a great victory for agriculture — by agricultural organizations. But was it? In the first place, the constitutionality of the Code itself was not challenged, and whenever acceptable criteria for measuring this type of pollution are established, the Health Department or whatever new agency will be enforcing the code will be able to make its decisions stick. In the second place, the publicity given this case is unlikely to have created any great reservoir of sympathy on the part of the non-farm public for the farmer.

To an outsider, might it not seem that agricultural interests were far more concerned with overturning the Health Department's ruling than in correcting the conditions that led up to it? The Farm Bureau may well have been correct in viewing the decision as one that could be used as a weapon by land developers against agriculture; certainly it was correct in challenging the lack of criteria for determining odor pollution; but the January ruling in Gorniakowski's favor is not in any sense a permanent solution to the problem or even a step toward a solution, except that it did lead to the establishment of a council to work out regulations regarding the application of the Air Pollution Code to farm operations.

It is important, of course, that rulings such as the Health Department's in this case be tested in court; but it is also important that farmers work out other methods of dealing with community pressure. Ideally, they could take positive steps to correct pollu-

tion **before** punitive action is taken by regulatory agencies. This is the view expressed by one of our State's best dairy farmers. He learned his lesson the hard way after being summoned before his local town board.

Public Protest and Action

Another case that comes to mind is that of the Supreme Cattle Co. in Schuyler County, New York, not far from Cornell. This type of concentrated dairy-beef feeding operation is a relatively new development in agriculture, particularly in the East, and the pollution potential is enormous — from odors, from waste and nutrient runoff, and so forth. At an early stage, there were complaints about the Supreme Cattle operation — from neighbors, who objected to the smell, and from fishermen. The State Conservation Department was called into the picture.

In December 1969, after two years of operating at a production level of 2,000 beef animals annually, the company's directors announced a proposed expansion to 10,000 animals a year. However, public protest was so vociferous that the company rescinded its decision only two months later "in consideration of a need to institute pollution prevention facilities." The affair was given a great deal of attention by the local press, including a follow-up story five months after the company began its anti-pollution program noting the great improvement in control of odors and runoff. The point here is that the Supreme Cattle Co. did take **positive** action, in response to public pressure rather than court action, to correct what could have become an intolerable situation.

Open Communication Channels

It is also important to keep communication channels open between farmers and the government — the federal, state, and local agencies that will be enforcing anti-pollution legislation as well as making available financial assistance to farmers whose livelihood would be endangered by the cost of adopting anti-pollution measures. It is vitally important that our legislators, most of whom are from urban environments, be made aware of the waste management problems facing modern food producers and processors. Without an understanding of the technological and financial problems involved in curbing agricultural pollution, no lawmaker can

begin to formulate just laws. Farmers cannot be expected to comply with impossible standards or to bear the full cost of equipment that is so expensive to install that they would be forced out of business.

The most effective way of communicating any problem is to demonstrate it. With this in mind, the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University conducted a tour this past June for state legislators and other interested individuals. They were taken on tours of the college's agricultural waste management laboratory and pilot plant and introduced to various techniques and problems involved in the field. The two-day session concluded with a boat tour of Cayuga Lake, where the effects of pollution were pointed out. One assemblyman called the tour "a good refresher course," and another commented that it was "extremely beneficial to legislators, particularly those from New York City."

Most Vocal Public — the Young

Any discussion of the environmental crisis and public relations would be incomplete without some mention of that most vocal and visible segment of the concerned public — the young. Throughout the past decade they have been in the vanguard of the civil rights and peace movements, just as they are now in the forefront of the ecological action movement of the seventies. Their concern is understandable. As many of them are only too eager to point out, it is their generation that will pay for the damage inflicted upon the environment by generations past. Accordingly, there is a great sense of urgency to their participation in the environmental reform movement; as David Sachs, 24-year-old president of Stanford University's Conservation Group, sums it up, "If these problems are not resolved in 10 years, we will wipe ourselves out in 30 years."

Perhaps because of this feeling of urgency, there are extremists in the movement — those who propose a return to subsistence farming, who exhort their fellow students to search out and destroy the factories that manufacture or produce pollutants, who would rather destroy our technology entirely than master it to build a better world. And there is the usual complement of exhibitionists and rhetoricians in the movement, and of short-sighted thinkers who litter college campuses with leaflets urging environmental beautification. But for the most part, the concern

expressed by young people is legitimate and many of the corrective measures they propose are reasonable.

Certainly their involvement is intense. At the first environmental teach-in held at Northwestern University last January, 7,000 young people sat up from 7 p.m. til dawn listening to speakers such as Stanford's population biologist, Paul Ehrlich, and others discuss the myriad problems the movement must face. Closed circuit TV had to be set up in adjoining rooms to accommodate the overflow from the lecture hall. Two months later, in March, nearly 14,000 students attended a kick-off rally for a four-day teach-in at the University of Michigan. And in April, the first nation-wide teach-in was held with at least a thousand college campuses and an estimated 10,000 junior and senior high school campuses across the country participating.

Where Was Agriculture on Earth Day?

What are agricultural interests doing to keep the lines of communication open with these young people? According to Gene Lodgson, writing in the June 1970 *Farm Journal*, we are not doing very much. "Where were you on Earth Day?" he asks. "While you were busy with your own Earth Week, plowing, disking, trying to get the crop in, ecologists across the nation told giant rallies of young people that there might be no tomorrow. And some very intelligent people in the audience believe it." He goes on to describe the content of the speeches he heard and the handouts he saw: "Fact and fancy, truth and absurdity, mixed together in abandon all across the nation on Earth Day." And finally, in conclusion, he asks, "Where were you, American farmer — you who understand as much about ecology and Earth Week as any expert alive? Where were you to help these young people separate fact from fancy?"

A Kansas farmer wrote a response to Lodgson's article. "I am one farmer who was concerned and tried to get some objective information to young people. For the most part I ran into indifference and general slowness on the part of related USDA agencies. They put out the usual releases, and when the kids called their hand they couldn't deliver. So the young people had only the Rachel Carson side of the story. We farmers must accept responsibility in improving the environment and must articulate our concern to the young people. They are **our** youth, if we just realize it."

The point made in this letter is one we all need to remember — that young people are not going to be satisfied with prepared statements and canned news releases when they come around looking for information. They are looking, instead, for a dialogue, where they can get specific answers to specific questions, and we are going to have to be prepared to deal with this need.

Industry Is Involved

Certainly, this is the approach being adopted by industry spokesmen, many of whom were present at Earth Day teach-ins. Geigy Chemical sent a representative to Brown University to participate in a water pollution panel; FMC Corporation sent four spokesmen to Idaho State to discuss pollution control measures; Union Carbide sent its manager of environmental pollution control to West Virginia University; Eastman Kodak was represented at a number of upstate New York colleges. The list goes on, but most impressive of all, the president of Dow Chemical took part in a panel discussion at the University of Michigan's March teach-in — and lived to tell about it!

Why couldn't agriculture take a page out of his book and adopt a six-point public relations program that would:

1. Involve just about everybody in agriculture in environmental improvement.
2. Continue to attack agriculture's own pollution problems rapidly and aggressively.
3. Identify resources, human and technical, that can be applied to ecological problems.
4. Establish an internal and external environmental communications network to achieve maximum participation.
5. Persuade others to join in the crusade for a clean environment.
6. Develop yardsticks to measure progress.

Sensitive Agricultural College Students

While most of the teach-ins this past year focused sharply upon industrial and urban problems, just as the media have, there are campuses — particularly agricultural colleges — whose students are also acutely sensitive to the problems of agricultural pollution

and who are anxious to contribute to their solution. An example comes to mind. Our communication arts majors edit a monthly magazine, *The Cornell Countryman*, which goes to students, staff, and alumni of the College of Agriculture, as well as to various agencies and libraries throughout the state. Last winter, the editor of the February issue chose as his theme, "The Environmental Crisis," and put a great deal of time and effort into writing and gathering factual articles on such topics as the upcoming teach-in, the population problem, thermal pollution of Cayuga Lake from a proposed nuclear power plant, and the accomplishments to date of the Cornell Task Force on Agricultural Waste.

Except for some problems in gathering information for the articles, everything else went smoothly with the issue until the day the copy for the back cover came back from the printer. This space is used each month by the College to run what is essentially a public-service type advertisement. We had thought to use the space in this particular issue to print an adapted version of the poem, "The Balance of Nature." It describes what might happen if some of the more hare-brained schemes of the ecological activists were adopted; if, after millennia of technological progress, man were forced to return to a primitive standard of living. Now the poem does make a valid point — that we must guard against **overreacting** to the undesirable by-products of technological progress — but some say the rhetoric is extreme; others say it isn't. What do you think after reading these excerpts?

. . . soon it came to pass that certain, albeit secure
and well-nourished, members of society,
Filled with ennui, indifference, ignorance and egoism,
Disapproved of the farmer using scientific methods.
They deprecated his ways for producing and protecting
the lush food they themselves so enjoyed,
They condemned the farmer and all who aided him for
disturbing the Balance of Nature. . . .
False Jeremiahs and Cassandras chanted warnings of
doom for all mankind if farmers continued to use
science to produce food. . . .
It was sinful, they screamed, to thwart Nature, and
not let it take its course.

The poem goes on to describe how these "false Jeremiahs and Cassandras . . . persuaded the lawmakers . . . to pass laws that

abolished science from the farm” and to ban pesticides, fertilizers, and preservatives. Then Nature took its course:

Insects, disease, weeds and vermin returned to
inherit the earth.

Man’s crops shriveled, his animals perished,

Abundance turned to famine and food costs soared. . . .

And the few people who survived the resulting famine, disease,
and war

. . . wandered aimlessly to seek food. . . .

Like other animals they struggled fitfully and
fearfully to survive.

They had once again returned to THE BALANCE OF NA-
TURE.

Our Rhetoric and Theirs

Incredible as it may seem, not one of us on the faculty advisory board to the magazine saw any reason why this full verse might be considered inappropriate on the back cover of an issue devoted to environmental quality. But the student editor certainly did. And I remind you that he is a reasonable, sensible, agricultural college student. As soon as he got to the lines referring to ecological activists as “certain members of society, filled with ennui, indifference, ignorance and egoism” and as “False Jeremiahs and Cassandras chanting warnings of doom,” he exploded and marched down to my office, spoiling for a fight. He was more than a little disappointed, I think, when I immediately saw his point. As he said, the poem not only undermined much of what he had tried to say in the issue, but it did not accurately reflect the position of the College of Agriculture. After all, the College had recently announced removal of DDT from most of its 1970 recommendations, and this was just one of many steps the College had taken in the past toward seeking solutions to the problems of environmental deterioration.

The poem was scrapped, and we decided to run a back cover that listed some of the positive actions the College had taken over the last few months – the 1970 recommendations, the October forum on environmental quality, and the January agricultural waste conference on the relationship of agriculture to soil and water pollution.

Everything turned out well, and we and the student editors got many compliments on this issue. But the incident demonstrated to me something that I think we all tend to forget: that the young are as sensitive to our rhetoric as we are to theirs. If we are going to make any real progress toward improving the quality of our environment, we cannot afford to let the generation gap divide our nation on this issue.

Colleges Are Adding New Courses

Fortunately, most colleges and universities share the concern of their students here. Many have added courses in ecology and the environment; one — Columbia University — now offers both the M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in environmental science and engineering. Environmental law is the fastest growing field in the legal profession, with one out of five of today's 65,000 law students now taking at least one course in this area.

The College of Agriculture at Cornell and the land-grant universities in your states have long offered courses related to the environment in a number of departments, including agricultural engineering, conservation, and ecology, and extension agents and specialists have been working for years with farmers, schools, and the community in this area. Last year, an environmental quality information center was established at our own agricultural and human ecology library, containing source material on water, air, and soil pollution; wildlife conservation; pesticide residues; population control; and other related topics.

The College has also put out numerous publications in the field; an example is the spring issue of New York's *Food and Life Sciences Quarterly*, which has as its theme "Agriculture and the Environment." Incidentally, it received special praise from Governor Rockefeller in a press release issued from his office. As a result, we have had additional requests for the issue from people in metropolitan and suburban areas.

High schools and grammar schools, too, are upgrading their environment quality curricula. The American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation has started a program called "Project ME" (for Man's Environment) to be used in the schools, and throughout the country children and teenagers are participating in ecological action campaigns. Girl Scouts in Hartford, Connecticut, demonstrated for clean air; 1,200 high

school students in Palo Alto, California, staged their own environmental teach-in; and students of all ages took part in Earth Day observances. Clearly, this will be the most concerned and could be the best-educated generation our country has ever seen in regard to the environment — and we are going to need these young people.

Will Movement Grow More Militant?

Our problems are just beginning. There is always, as *Life* magazine suggests in its issue on the environment, the possibility of the movement growing more militant, of a widespread public demand that — for instance — farmers stop using nitrate fertilizers because of the health problems associated with nitrate-contaminated water. Already, some California pediatricians are warning mothers against giving their infants tap water drawn from small-town water supplies. And industry has begun to point the finger at agriculture for its role in pollution; the same Geigy Chemical official who spoke at Brown University told his audience that the Interior Department and many conservationists agree that municipalities and agriculture are bigger polluters of the nation's water supply than industry.

So far, with the exception of DDT, agriculture's public relations problems involving agricultural wastes have been small-scale and localized, but there is always the chance that the brush fires we have been fighting can turn into a full-scale conflagration. We are going to have to take more initiative in our public relations programs. We will have to follow the example of industry by sending our spokesmen to college campuses, running institutional ads, and by making full use of all the media to emphasize the **positive** actions farmers are taking to combat pollution.

And we are going to have to keep up good communications with our legislators. Probably one of the most unexplored areas of this whole problem is how to formulate and enforce workable laws. We have already seen, in the Gorniakowski case, the difficulty of making present laws stick because of the insufficient criteria for determining some kinds of pollution. But it is only a matter of time before such criteria are established and before even tougher laws are enacted. Some are already on the books. Michigan has passed a law that permits any citizen to file suit to protect the air, water, and other national resources; so, any resi-

dent of Michigan can ask the courts to shut down any company for pollution, or challenge any state agency regulations as being too lenient toward industry, or even sue a neighbor for burning trash. And the plaintiff does not have to suffer any personal loss in order to file. He may be required to post a \$500 surety bond to discourage frivolous suits, but otherwise it is wide open. And a similar bill has recently been introduced in Congress.

Will Reorganizations Cause Problems?

Also, President Nixon has advocated reorganization plans to place environmental protection and management under two new agencies — the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The first, EPA, would take over certain functions from a number of other government agencies, among them the Federal Water Quality Administration, the National Air Pollution Control Administration, the Food and Drug Administration, and various agencies of the Agriculture and Interior Departments, the Atomic Energy Commission, and so forth.

This kind of reorganization and consolidation is also going on at the state level; for example, the brand new Environmental Conservation Department of New York State has taken over all the duties of the former Conservation Department as well as certain functions from the Health Department and the Department of Agriculture and Markets. Whenever all these reorganizations shake down, we can expect whole new problem areas to become apparent — and those 1,300 or so law students now studying environmental law can expect to find plenty of work and agriculture's public relations job will be tougher than ever.

Whoever said that the environment was a politically dead issue?