

What Kind Of Research Do We Need?

There is widespread assumption that all research is good, that science holds the key to unlock all our problems. But this conventional wisdom falls apart on the further assumption that all scientific research occurs in the test tube and the chemical laboratory.

National Farmer's Union President Tony Dechant recently pointed out that there are other kinds of research, and he has called for new priorities in our agricultural research program. We need economic and social research, as well as biological research, he said. Dechant believes that the emphasis in the

vast research program now being carried out in agriculture may be misdirected.

For example, in 1965 (the last year for which total figures are available) 85 percent of our research was in the field of the biological sciences. This included plant and animal research relating to such things as breeding, varieties, diseases and insects. "I do not want to suggest that I believe any of this research money was misspent or misused," said Dechant, "but I do suggest that in selecting projects for research, we are obligated — particularly where public funds are

involved—to make choices based on the priority of needs."

"One of the disappointing aspects of our research priorities," said Dechant, "has been the attention — or lack of it — that we give to protecting the farmer in his relationships with the people to whom he sells his products, as well as the people from whom he buys his equipment and supplies. The name for this field is 'farmer bargaining power.'" Dechant said that you have to search hard to even find the category in the research program of the USDA and the land grant colleges. In 1965, only 20 man years of scientific effort

were devoted to research in the category of "farmer bargaining power."

"We were doing eight times as much research on appraising soil — that means making maps and soil surveys — that helped people build septic tanks and highways. We were doing four times as much research on the preparation of foods. We were doing 43 times as much research to improve the biological efficiency of field crops," Dechant said.

"I say that it is time for us to re-evaluate our research programs," he continued. "New problems and new conditions demand new priorities."

Dechant calls for studies on

how to make better use of co-operatives, computer programming for livestock producers to match that of buyers, a national land policy, and what are proper import levels for agricultural products. It's not all research, of course. Part of it is spreading available information. There are numerous institutes, forums and seminars on how farmers must be more efficient, on how to use bigger and more complicated equipment, on larger inputs and greater output. "How about a program to bring about better understanding among producers of bargaining techniques that are available?" asked Dechant. "How about seminars on how we can put together federal marketing orders for potatoes? ... We (in Farmers Union) are working on putting together egg marketing orders. I happen to feel that this is just as important a program as it was for a land grant college to design egg factories that produce over 300,000 eggs a day, or finding new ways to keep eggs from breaking when they hit fast-moving conveyor belts."

Part of the problem, Dechant says candidly, is that land grant colleges find themselves in a conflict of interest between family farmers and the large corporations that provide grants for research that will help the professor and other middle men.

The list of failures to face the real problems is long in our programs of research and information. "For example," said Dechant, "we take for granted that a 7-billion-dollar national security reserve of strategic metals is good for America. Have we really made an effort to sell the American consumer on the need for an emergency reserve of food and fiber?"

WHEN FOOD BUDGET'S OFF BALANCE, LAY BLAME ON THAT HIDDEN FIFTH

About one-fifth of our average grocery bill isn't food at all. It's something to wear, or read, or listen to, or clean with, or cook in.

For every dollar's worth of food that goes into our supermarket basket, we put in 20 cents worth of laundry soap, insecticides, children's socks, potted plants, paper towels, hi-fi records, and even multi-volume encyclopedias or children's classics.

About 90 percent of all sales of cat and dog food go over the supermarket checkout counter — along with about half the hair spray, aspirin and toothpaste we buy for personal and family use.

We spend more in grocery stores for dog food than we do for commercial canned baby food for our growing infants.

And, nationwide, we also spend more for three products — canned and bottled beer for off-premise consumption, cigarettes, and pet foods — than we do for fresh beef. That's the way our "food" dollar goes.

This is the time of year when insects are looking for warm places to hibernate, the State Department of Agriculture advises.

Boxelder bugs and hackberry gall makers are among the insects currently looking for warmer abodes. Millipedes also frequently migrate in the fall and may get into homes, especially damp areas such as basements.

None of these insects bite or are harmful according to the Department's entomologists.

They suggest housewives use vacuum cleaners indoors to get rid of the unwelcome intruders. Insecticides are available for outdoor use.

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