

PENNSTATE
College of Agricultural Sciences
DAIRY & ANIMAL SCIENCE
E-I-E-I-O
 From Dairy and Animal Science at Penn State

IS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION STILL NEEDED?

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• A company decides to market a vitamin-mineral premix on the basis that the limestone it contains is mined in the Midwest, and therefore of better quality than that found in Pennsylvania. A concerned farmer contacts extension to see if there is any truth to the claim of improved quality.

• A rural resident files suit against a neighboring hog farmer, claiming noxious odors rendered his property virtually uninhabitable and reduced its market value. The farmer's defense is the "Right to Farm Law," which prevents nuisance action as long as the operation is normal, and no complaints have occurred for one year. Since extension is in the best position to decide whether or not the operation is normal, the court seeks its opinion.

• A moderately sized packing company considers an investment involving tens of thousands of dollars. The investment is for an optical probe that will measure fat and muscle in pork carcasses so they can be priced fairly and competitively. Each manufacturer of available optical probes claims its product is the best. During a period of several years, decisions made on which optical probe to purchase and the nature of the payment schedule for producers will involve millions of dollars. The packer contacts extension to seek objective advice.

• A swine producer files a claim

against a power company for production losses due to stray voltage. When the two parties disagree on the circumstances of the stray voltage problem and the nature of the losses, extension is called for assistance.

These scenarios probably bear little resemblance to the concepts of the Smith Lever Act, the 1914 Congressional mandate which formed the Cooperative Extension Service. The routines of early extension workers were vital in getting the latest technology of the industrial age to our country's rural population. Cultivation and fertilization techniques, principles of animal breeding, food preservation — in a sense, the needs of today are similar to those in 1914. But our current needs exist on a different level, and today a different approach is necessary.

Today, in addition to extension, many more companies, agencies, and institutions provide information to the public. For example, a dairy farmer is bombarded with information from commercial publications, feed companies, veterinarians, private consultants, pharmaceutical companies, dairy cooperatives, and computer databases. This raises the obvious question, "Is extension still needed?"

Extension's Strengths

The mission of extension (redefined in March 1991) states: The Cooperative Extension System helps people improve their lives through an educational process that uses scientific knowledge focused on issues and needs.

Yes, we're in the education business that serves farmers, homeowners, township supervisors,



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youth, even the senior population. But to remain effective, our information must be accurate and impartial.

Unlike a company that markets feed, buildings, or pharmaceuticals, extension has no vested interest. And so we truly have the edge on impartiality. With this impartiality, we have contact with youth through 4-H and undergraduate education. Teaching young people to consider all the facts and to think critically is an important goal that applies throughout life in any business. We build on that impartiality by conducting research — adding not only to our own knowledge base, but that of the companies and agencies that also provide information to the public.

Weaknesses

Extension is sometimes criti-

cized for being too bureaucratic and generalized, criticism that may be valid to some extent. Large, innovative farmers tend to skip extension when seeking advice.

For example, the top 20 percent of swine producers using the Pig Improvement Company records system (Pigtales) was recently asked to identify their primary source of advice. Of 57 producers responding, 24 listed a veterinarian as their primary source of advice. Genetics companies, feed companies, and private consultants followed. Only one farmer listed extension at the top of sources of advice.

Because extensions funding base is limited largely to a shrinking base of public funding and grant support, county- and university-based staffs are dwindling. Yet we strive to meet all the needs that we did in the past. This spreads the extension staff thin and hampers specialization.

Changing With The Times

Changes are already occurring. For example, the nature of faculty appointments is much different today than it was even 15 years ago. At that time, many universities hired faculty to teach and do research, and other faculty to conduct extension programming. Today, teaching, research, and extension faculty in general are no longer separated. This improves interaction and collaboration, which keeps all faculty in touch

with the realities of research programs needed to address real-life problems outside the university.

For example, all faculty members hired in the last five years in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences have split appointments. Responsibility is divided among teaching, research, or extension. Most faculty working in extension are also expected to conduct research. There is little question that teaching (in the classroom or in the field) increases proficiency in a particular subject area. But it's also true that the real experts in a given area are those doing research. Clearly, research activity by both university- and county-based personnel should continue to increase.

On a county basis, Penn State has met the generalization dilemma, in part, by appointing agents with multicounty status — one agent in a county develops expertise in dairy cattle while an agent in a neighboring county conducts the livestock program. Although minor funding difficulties sometimes occur, and farmers may lose some accessibility, the public generally is better served by the same number of people.

Another idea that's occasionally mentioned is charging for services. This would help identify programs most important to the public and would relieve the funding crunch. We certainly would become more sensitive to public needs. We currently charge for some publica-

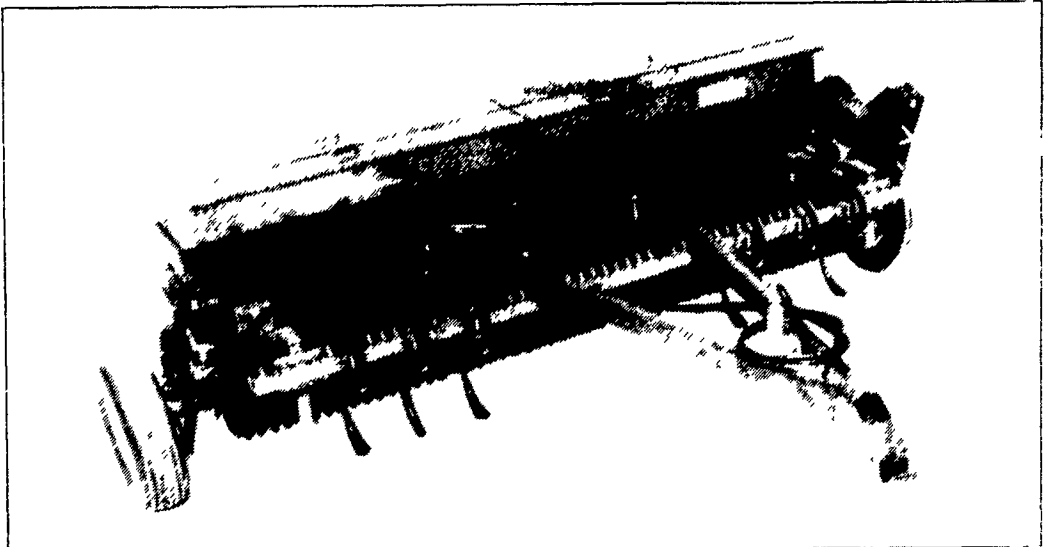
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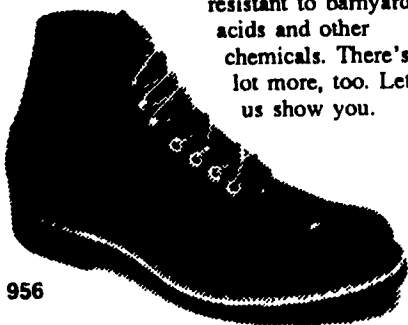
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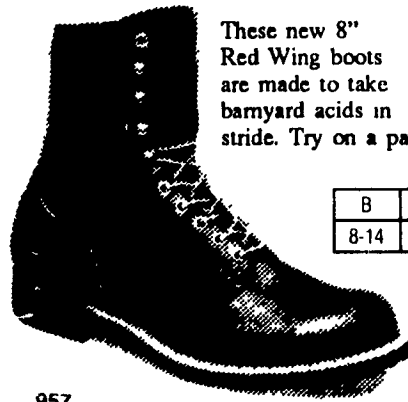


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