AN EXTENSION LAY LEADER'S REACTION TO THE MORNING PROGRAM

Mary Grezaffi
National Extension Committee

"You may be on the right track," as Will Rogers pointed out, "but if you stand still long enough, you can still get run over by a freight train." You are certainly on the right track when it comes to focusing on public policy issues. But the need for momentum is paramount.

I would like to share with you my perspective as a Southern lay leader on the National Extension Committee (NEC) and conclude with my perspective as a working farmer.

The NEC is one of four functional committees established by the Joint Council on Food and Agricultural Sciences. We contribute to planning and coordination between extension and others involved with educational programs addressing the priorities established by the Joint Council. The committee provides a national extension perspective on the formulation of policies and reports prepared by the Council.

In 1991 we focused on issues relating to natural resources. In February of that year we issued a resolution regarding the need for momentum in this process of public policy education. The NEC's premise is that, in order to address public policy issues effectively through education, the system must be able to respond, not only to situations as they arise predictably, but to those that arise unexpectedly. In addition, the system must anticipate through futuristic planning.

Advocacy Versus Objectivity

I have listened with great interest to the debate regarding the most effective method of delivering public policy education. It is truly a challenge to offer an unbiased approach when considering our values and perspectives. One program with which I am familiar is, however, addressing this challenge.

Agromedicine: The South Carolina Experience, was established in 1984 in response to recognized needs for public service, education and research in agriculture and medicine. The program combines the resources of the land grant and medical campuses in promoting agriculture and consumer health and safety. In terms of financial

support, the founders stress maintaining objectivity to avoid the appearance of being a spokesperson for any particular group or industry.

Relying upon facts and presenting them objectively can reduce the harmful effects of sensationalism. Sensationalism, such as that surrounding the Alar incident, can and will dictate policy if those with the knowledge base and position to address these issues do not come forth expeditiously and effectively.

Coalition Building

Coalition-building is essential to the long-term viability of production agriculture. An outstanding example has been set by Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service Environmentalist Education Specialist Bill Branch. He has brought together such groups as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries, the Farm Bureau, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Extension Service, the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society, along with representatives from research and higher education and private citizens.

The culmination of his coalition-building efforts resulted in the 1991 passage of an act by the Louisiana legislature calling for a review by the Louisiana State University Agriculture Center and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry of any actions by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality affecting farming. The act also called for the governor to appoint a liaison between DEQ and the agriculture industry.

Before DEQ implements any rule or regulation affecting agriculture, the liaison reviews the proposed action with the Agriculture Center and the Department of Agriculture and Forestry to determine the economic impact upon agriculture and the possibility of an alternative method that could achieve the environmental goal of DEQ.

The Louisiana approach is an attempt to avoid undue regulation and/or reduce the economic impact of regulation upon the agriculture industry while addressing public policy issues.

Both the South Carolina program and the Louisiana program rely on coalition building, a broad scientific base and facilitation of information for their effectiveness.

Leadership Development

Another area critical to public policy education is leadership development. There continues to be a great need for leadership development programs in agriculture and on the community level. Many

states are addressing these needs and I applaud you and encourage you to continue with this endeavor. I graduated from the first Louisiana State University Agricultural Leadership Development class. The program has my full support.

Public Policy Education

Public policy education is also essential to the long-term viability of production agriculture. Our people in the field—county agents, home economists, agriculture specialists—need more support to become better prepared to address public policy issues. As Alan Hahn points out, public policy education is a critical element in addressing issues. Focusing on issues is necessary for effective public policy education. Ideally, Hahn stresses, "The concerns that educators focus on should be determined by the people themselves." He further suggests an often under-used tool for identifying these issues—*listening* (p. 3).

As a farmer dependent upon agriculture to support my family, I do not believe farmer's voices are being heard. In the August/September, 1992, issue of the *Farm Journal*, staff economist John Marten cautions, "We're a shrinking issue at the national level; farm numbers and influence are both slipping (p. 5)."

"A shrinking issue." This is not hard to believe when, according to that same August/September issue of the *Farm Journal*, agriculture was included as an afterthought at the Democratic National Convention (Hillgren and Klintberg). Even the Republican platform says that a vibrant farm and ranch economy is critical to the economic vitality of rural America. I say a vibrant farm and ranch economy is critical to the economic vitality of *all* America—including our national security!

Alan Hahn indicates there are two questions to ask when identifying public policy dimensions of any topic: 1) Do the policies of organizations or government create some of the problems, obstacles, or barriers that people face? 2) Are changes in the policies of organizations or government among the alternatives for solving problems, removing obstacles or otherwise improving the conditions people experience?

When considering our current situation in agriculture, I answer a resounding, "Yes!"

"If the answer to either question is yes," Hahn says, "then the potential exists for developing and implementing a public policy education program" (p. 4).

I hope the identifiers are listening.

Here are some of the public policy issues associated with production agriculture that need to be addressed:

- Agriculture's national image. We are a vital, essential industry, not an entitlement program. "Agriculture is facing a public relations crisis that is of monumental proportions," says Gary Enright, president of the Insight Development Institute. "Communication problems arise not because farmers are harming the environment or the animals they raise," Enright says, "but because people do not understand agriculture."

- Our presumed cheap food policy. Is its primary goal to promote exports or to keep food prices economical? In the September issue of *Farm Futures*, the publication's second presidential poll reveals "42% of the readers surveyed believe President Bush wants to keep prices low" (Knorr).

- The inequities associated with the 1985 and 1990 farm bills, along with a failure to increase exports and reduce supplies through market-clearing prices. These farm bills have resulted in the inability of many farmers, predominantly Southern farmers, to participate on a level playing field. We cannot prove our yields and are, therefore, denied equal access to program protection. In my area, I am witnessing a shift toward program crops—rice, sugar cane, cotton—as land is bid away from unsubsidized crops, leading to less diversity and more regionalized cropping patterns. Monoculture on land is returning. Where is production agriculture following these two farm bills? We are farming for 1970 prices at 1990 costs. No wonder the Congressional Budget Office predicted in excess of 500,000 more farmers will be forced to exit agriculture by 1995 (Congress of the United States, p. xvii). We simply cannot grow products and sell them for below our cost of production and stay in business—and some call this the "march of progress."

  Recently a rural summit to discuss the problems facing production agriculture and rural America was requested by lawmakers and rural leaders. The movement was spearheaded by Farm Credit lenders who recognize the vulnerability within the agricultural sector. This request was met with White House rejection. Why? Because sometimes it is not, "*Are* you listening, but *who* are you listening to." Top domestic policy advisor Clayton Yeutter contends that rural America, in the aggregate, "is in very solid shape economically . . . is very healthy indeed" (*Plains Reporter*, p. 1). Are you listening, Mr. President? You are invited to Pointe Coupee Parish to witness first hand the steadily declining state of a once vibrant rural community.

- Another issue of concern is the definition of agricultural-dependent counties as a reflection of net income. This definitely ignores the full impact of agriculture on rural communities. If we were to follow the IRS calculation of net farm income, farm dependent counties would join young farmers as an endangered species (Mills).

- The traditional farm family, long proclaimed the symbol of the true American family—encompassing our traditional ideals and values—is being torn apart by today's economic problems.
- Free trade negotiations—what does the future hold?
- Centralization of agriculture and related industries. Does this lead to contract agriculture? Are we headed in the same direction as the livestock industry. Does the end justify the means?
- The controversy over ethanol. Scientific evidence is growing indicating ethanol may ease one air pollution problem while adding another (Shaw, p. 34).
- The changing role of the Extension Service. Is it becoming history as was addressed in the September issue of *Progressive Farmer* (p. 3). Some say, if present trends continue, it is highly doubtful the Extension Service will survive. As farm numbers continue to decline, and we wind up with only a handful of farmers each operating 15,000 to 20,000 acres in every county, will they need an Extension Service?

These are all public policy issues as they relate to the overall farm economy and there are many more. We must address these issues with more focus and listen more attentively.

As we progress with public policy education in our country, let effective results, not just activity, be our goal. And, above all, let's keep moving!

REFERENCES

Congress of the United States. *The Outlook for Farm Commodity Program Spending, Fiscal Years 1990-1995.* Washington DC: Congressional Budget Office, Apr. 1990.

Enright, Gary. "If Not Us, Who?" *Progressive Farmer*, May, 1991, p. 13.

Hahn, Alan J. *Resolving Public Issues and Concerns through Policy Education.* Ithaca NY: Department of Human Service Studies, Cornell University, 1988.

Hillgren, Sonja and Patricia Peak Klintberg, eds. "Washington." *Farm Journal*, Aug./Sept. 1992, p. 8.

Knorr, Bryce. "Can Bush Recover?" *Farm Futures*, Sept. 1992, p. 10.

Marten, John. "A Clinton-Gore Victory Means Small Shifts for U.S. Farmers." *Farm Journal*, Aug./Sep. 1992, p. 5.

Mills, Becky. "Hope for the Next Generation." *Top Producer*. Jan. 1991, p. 22.

Plains Reporter. "White House Refuses Rural Summit Request." Williston ND, June 24, 1992, p. 1.

Progressive Farmer. "Is the Extension Service Becoming History?" September, 1992, p. 3.

Shaw, David. "Ethanol Debate Needs More Light and Less Heat." *Farm Futures*. Sept. 1992, p. 34.

Agriculture and Environmental Policymaking: Issues, Actors, Strategies