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Conducting Educational Work on Public Affairs With Organized Farm Groups

By G. Alvin Carpenter

The past year has afforded extension workers many unusual opportunities to do effective educational work in public affairs. The situation in our state was such that farmers, businessmen, and the public in general showed much interest and concern about national and local agricultural issues, and they were anxious to discuss them. The change of administrations and the appointment of a new Secretary of Agriculture caused people to wonder what changes might be proposed in farm programs.

On June 5, 1953, Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra T. Benson, addressed a letter to all farm organizations requesting them to ask their local units to undertake discussion of vital agricultural issues prior to December 31, 1953, and to provide his office with the resulting consensus of ideas and suggestions. The Farm Bureau and other farm groups in our state did not wait long before contacting the Extension Service for help. Meetings were soon arranged to talk over details for preparing materials and conducting training meetings over the state. In a state such as ours with a small specialist staff that is already overloaded, it was no small task to undertake a job of such proportions. It meant that we had to set aside some of our routine duties and concentrate on public policy problems almost exclusively from September through November.

ORGANIZATION OF PERSONNEL

At the outset we had strong administrative support for conducting work in public policy. The director appointed a steering committee consisting of the assistant director (an economist by training) as chairman, the farm management specialist, the head of the agricultural economics department, and the home agent leader as committee members. This committee was given the job of outlining the work to be done in cooperation with the Farm Bureau and other groups, preparing background material for use in training meetings, and guiding the extension effort in this field. The committee called upon other staff members who, by virtue of their training and experience, could make significant contributions. The committee recognized that specialists with good training and experience in economics and closely related fields would have to carry the load in preparing material and also in leading discussions of issues in local meetings.

County agents, whose major training is in the production fields and who usually lack time to prepare themselves adequately to handle many of the current policy questions, hesitate to lead discussions in meetings on public policy. Occasionally, you may find an agent who by training or by special interest can do the job. As it worked out in 1953-54, members of the steering committee carried the major load for extension with the support of county personnel in arranging meetings and getting attendance of farm people.

COOPERATION WITH FARM BUREAU

In conducting educational work in agricultural policy in Utah in 1954, the Extension Service cooperated very closely with the Farm Bureau, which is the largest of the organized farm groups. After preliminary meetings between the extension administration and the state Farm Bureau officers, the state Farm Bureau called a state-wide training meeting to which they invited their state directors and all presidents of county Farm Bureaus. The state Farm Bureau had received general instructions from the national Farm Bureau office outlining and urging an active program in agricultural policy development in all locals. Details of the proposed program were discussed with the county presidents. The Extension Service was asked to carry the ball in preparing background information on eight out of twelve national issues which the Secretary of Agriculture and the American Farm Bureau urged be considered at the "grass roots."

Decisions were made also at this meeting to include several important state issues such as: school financing, administration of public range lands, taxation of off-highway used gasoline, irrigation development, and others. County Farm Bureau presidents were also urged to consider local issues which were important to their respective areas. It was obvious that a considerable amount of factual background material would have to be assembled, and presented in a manner which would be fair and unbiased—a tremendous undertaking.

TRAINING MEETINGS CONDUCTED

Following the state-wide meeting with county Farm Bureau presidents and extension representatives, a series of six district training meetings covering all counties in the state was held in early September. It was emphasized that an educational program of analysis and discussion would be conducted jointly by the Extension Service and the Farm Bureau over a three-month period, after which each county would be requested to report the results of its deliberations to the state Farm Bureau.

Prior to these training meetings, all county Farm Bureaus had been requested to appoint a County Resolutions Committee of three of their best leaders to spearhead the consideration of public issues in the county. Qualifications for members of Resolutions Committees were as follows:

1. They should be actual farmers (men and women) who are good thinkers and have a broad understanding of the agricultural thinking of farmers in the county.
2. They should be representative of the agricultural interests of the county and capable of inspiring the confidence of others.
3. They should be influential citizens. They should be willing to put the general welfare of agriculture first, regardless of their own personal viewpoints.
4. No legislators, public employees (federal, state, or county), or Farm Bureau employees were eligible.

In the first round of training meetings, special emphasis was placed on procedures for conducting meetings in all Farm Bureau locals. County extension personnel and local Farm Bureau officers and leaders were instructed as to their responsibilities in the over-all effort. Handouts containing specific instructions were given to each person attending. County personnel were asked to publicize widely the series of meetings to follow to insure large participation. Local Farm Bureau officers acted as chairmen. State extension personnel and state Farm Bureau officers traveled together as a team in conducting these training meetings.

Demonstrations were given on procedures and methods of conducting discussion on two or three selected topics drawn from the "kit" prepared by the American Farm Bureau. Special emphasis was given to the importance of teaching people *how* to think through public questions rather than teaching them *what* to think. It was stressed that the job of extension personnel was to present factual information on the issues under consideration as fairly as possible but that the final decisions and resolutions were the responsibility of the lay people. Farm Bureau officers likewise were instructed not to dominate the meetings. Instructions were given that all meetings were to be conducted as democratically as possible and that all viewpoints should be heard.

The next series of training meetings was held after an interval of one month. Again, county extension personnel, local Farm Bureau officers, members of Resolutions Committees, and other local farm leaders were invited. County agents acted as chairmen of these day-

long meetings. State extension personnel took the leadership in explaining background material that had been prepared in the interim and in presenting highlights for discussion purposes. Considerable emphasis was given to ways in which background material could be used to stimulate discussion of issues in local meetings. County agents were requested to study the packets of background information and to be ready to lead discussions in local meetings. This was a tremendous challenge to most agents. Many felt their training was inadequate to handle some of the issues effectively. Nevertheless, some agents did a fair job, while others called for specialist help whenever they could get it. The state Farm Bureau had a limited staff but helped greatly in presenting issues in many local meetings.

Twelve district training meetings were held in the two series mentioned above, with a total attendance of 366 local Farm Bureau officers and extension personnel. In the two months following these training meetings, every county in the state and most communities where a Farm Bureau organization existed, held discussion meetings where extension agents and specialists participated in supplying factual information and in stimulating discussion. A total of 193 meetings was held with a combined participation of 3,168 farm people.

All counties had sent reports of meetings held and copies of resolutions adopted to the state Farm Bureau by December 1. These were reviewed by a State Resolutions Committee during the State Annual Convention the week of December 10. Summaries were presented to the public over both television and radio by Farm Bureau officials with an extension specialist as moderator. Resolutions were formulated to represent the state as a whole, and these were presented by delegates to the National Convention of the Farm Bureau according to regular Farm Bureau procedure.

TYPES OF BACKGROUND MATERIAL ASSEMBLED

The American Farm Bureau on the national level prepared a "kit" of suggestions and brief statements on twelve national issues. These "kits" were distributed by the state Farm Bureau to all attending the training meetings. The Extension Service prepared more detailed statements and discussion questionnaires on eight of these same national issues and several state and local issues as well. The list of topics covered included:

1. Objectives in national agricultural policy.
2. Agriculture and the general price level

3. Farm income stability and improvement
 - a. Government subsidies—amount and beneficiaries
 - b. Costs of price-support and consumer subsidy programs, 1936-52
 - c. Present and proposed programs for stabilizing farm prices and incomes
4. The federal budget
5. Production and marketing adjustments
 - a. Brief history of federal programs
 - b. Factors involved in reducing crop surpluses
6. Conservation and improvement of farm resources
 - a. Administration of public range lands
 - b. Water resource development for Utah
7. Capital needs of agriculture
8. Two-way trade or aid
 - a. Wool and tariff issues
9. Beef cattle situation in brief
10. A set of background statistics giving national and state figures for all major crops and livestock produced in the state
11. A list of selected reference material covering major phases of most important issues

The above material, consisting of 80 mimeographed pages, was assembled in sets and distributed to state and county Farm Bureau leaders, county extension personnel, and leaders of all important farm commodity groups in the state. This material was used rather extensively in the local meetings conducted throughout the state.

OTHER EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL

In addition to the background material mentioned above, which was prepared primarily for use in working with the Farm Bureau, staff members prepared a series of thirteen articles dealing with current issues in agricultural policy for general distribution. Arrangements were made beforehand with editors of five of the most important daily papers of the state to have the series published during early November. They were written in popular newspaper style as far as possible. The combined distribution of the daily newspapers using

these articles exceeded 300,000 and covered all parts of the state. These published articles dealt with:

1. National agricultural problems and policies
2. The cost-price squeeze in agriculture
3. The meaning of parity prices for farmers
4. Current issues on farm price supports
5. High fixed price supports for agriculture
6. Flexible price supports for agriculture
7. The two-price system for agriculture
8. Income supports vs. price supports
9. Credit needs of farmers and livestock producers
10. Two-way trade or aid
11. The public interest in private farming
12. Problems involved in guaranteeing cost of production to farmers
13. Acreage allotments and marketing quotas

Many letters and comments regarding these articles were received from readers and prominent individuals. As a direct result of these articles, several participating staff members were called upon to discuss issues before various farm groups, business groups, and others. In addition to appearing in all the important daily newspapers of the state, these thirteen articles were mimeographed in sets and distributed to county agents, farm leaders, business leaders, and other key citizens for reference. Many requests could not be filled. This particular set of articles received perhaps the best distribution of anything the Utah Extension Service has published to date.

Also, public policy issues are included regularly in the weekly leaflet, "Let's Look Ahead," which the extension economists prepare for distribution through county agents to 2,500 farm and business leaders throughout the state.

Although Utah has a very small extension staff in economics, by organizing our efforts, we were able to prepare and disseminate a considerable quantity of educational material in public affairs. Requests for information on public problems are constantly expanding. It is obvious that we will need to increase our staff in this field if we are to meet the problem.

WORK WITH OTHER FARM AND BUSINESS GROUPS

In addition to the extensive program conducted in cooperation with the Farm Bureau, channels were kept open to work with many farm commodity groups, business groups, and civic clubs. Staff members discussed many policy issues in annual meetings of livestock associations, dairy cooperatives, horticultural groups, and other farm gatherings. Likewise, many requests were received to give talks before civic clubs and business groups in various parts of the state. In most of these assignments a general presentation of certain issues was given with some time allotted at the close for discussion. It is difficult to measure the results of meetings of this type, but undoubtedly some good is accomplished. People seem to be much interested in discussing public affairs.

GENERAL APPRAISAL AND CONCLUSIONS

Work with the Farm Bureau consisted primarily of preparing background material as mentioned, assistance in conducting training meetings for local leaders, and some leading of discussions at local meetings as time permitted. Naturally, some issues were discussed more thoroughly than others, depending on local interest. Without exception, the groups discussing the topics were alert, eager, and enthusiastic. Many individuals were pleased that Farm Bureau efforts were being directed toward analyzing these important policy issues.

After meeting with some of the groups a second and third time, definite changes in opinions and philosophies on certain issues could be noted. For example, in the first meetings there were usually a few strong advocates for high, rigid price supports and some of the first discussions ended on that plane. After the second or third exposure, individuals became more realistic and were able to think deeper concerning implications of alternative policies, and many opinions were changed as facts were analyzed.

It is apparent that many farmers are not well informed on activities of their government and the many programs concerned with agriculture. They lack information that is basic to a clear analysis of public policies. It is equally apparent that many farmers do not have the time or incentive to analyze public issues carefully. A few are content to express their own value judgments and let it go at that. Generally, the more remote the problem from the day-to-day experience of the farmer, the less keen his interest in discussing the issues involved. It is very important that discussion leaders localize the problems and discuss them in terms familiar to farm people.

Experience gained this past year indicates that if lay leaders are to be used effectively to lead discussions in local meetings, many will need additional training in discussion techniques and procedures. In addition, they will need to become much more familiar and conversant with essential background information. Training meetings with key leaders emphasizing these very points are being planned for October this year. We certainly agree that the discussion approach is the most desirable in conducting educational work in public policy.

Proper timing of most issues for discussion is particularly important. Education should not be delayed until the public is making decisions by ballot or otherwise.

It is apparent that farm people and business groups alike are very interested in discussing public issues. There is a great challenge to educational agencies, and the Extension Service in particular, to provide basic facts and good leadership. Basic statistical data and accurate facts should be used at all critical points where possible to help guide discussion to sound conclusions. People usually welcome analysis to help them form sound opinions. It is very important to keep people thinking objectively. Lay people often have difficulty in differentiating the "kernels" from the "chaff" in many public issues. The educational worker in this field can render valuable service in clarifying the essential points of each issue and setting up background material in such a way that discussants may come to grips with the real problems.

I believe that extension should not limit its efforts in this field to working entirely through organized farm groups such as the Farm Bureau, National Grange, or Farmers Union. We should cooperate closely with these and other groups, but also keep a channel of education open directly to the public. Organized groups often act as pressure groups and may be somewhat biased. Educational assistance from the Extension Service should be available for all organized groups and the general public as well.

If the educational program is to penetrate to the "rank and file," county agents, farm organization leaders, and all leadership connected with the program will need additional in-service training. We simply cannot teach other people that which we do not understand ourselves. We must also recognize that this field is very dynamic, and leaders must keep abreast of the issues.

In conclusion, the role of extension education in public policy is not to initiate action on policy issues, but to equip rural people and

others to take intelligent action through proper channels. The educational program should be unbiased and comprehensive enough to include means of transmitting conclusions and judgments to those who have primary responsibility for initiating action, legislatively, administratively, or otherwise.