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PRIORITIES IN THE CHANGING WORLD OF AGRICULTURE

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Agriculture is undergoing major changes. The phase-out of the farm program safety net, the growth of international trade, and the development of new crops and varieties through biotechnology present farmers with a vast array of choices. Each choice presents both opportunity and risk. Farmers look to USDA for effective, research-based options: decision-making skills that make the difference between failure and survival--and survival and success. USDA is in a position to provide the leadership to address emerging problems that affect the spectrum of economic, environmental, and social conditions in the United States and worldwide.

We must find answers to increasing agricultural productivity without damaging soil fertility, fragile ecosystems, or our air and water quality. Population growth and improving diets in third world countries has changed the world food situation from one of surplus to that of near supply-demand balance. Science-based knowledge is essential to the future success of agriculture and the land-grant community is the foundation of that knowledge.

Farming is no longer the largest element in the economic base of most rural communities in the United States. However, agriculture is clearly important to the fate of these communities. Adequate numbers of off-farm jobs are key to the small family farm and rural communities. Their viability can be addressed by job decentralization, which is driven by fiber optics, fax and Internet communications, and increased agricultural exports, particularly value-added products. Research, teaching and extension provide real world solutions to these real world problems. I repeat, new knowledge is key to success for U.S. agriculture.

Research, education, and extension programs must be strengthened to enable us to achieve long-term sustainability in agricultural production that achieves and maintains profitability, minimizes negative environmental effects, and develops and improves strong rural and agricultural communities. We must respond quickly, and with credibility, to broad public concerns for safe, nutritious and accessible foods.

As we approach the reauthorization of agricultural research, extension and teaching legislation, there are 11 general principles which we are looking for in the new title:

- Using existing legislative and administrative authorities because of the flexibility they offer.

- Encouraging efficiencies throughout the research, education and extension system and reinvesting administrative savings in programs.
- Encouraging multi-functional, multi-regional, multi-institutional activities to achieve maximum leverage of federal, state and local dollars.
- Continuing support for a range of funding mechanisms and the current structure of intramural and extramural research.
- Continuing support for formula funds.
- Merit review with peer evaluation in all research programs with competitively awarded programs.
- An active federal-state-local partnership in setting priorities, conducting the work, and evaluating the work.
- Public sector/private sector partnerships as a means of leveraging scarce federal dollars.
- Responsiveness to national and regional needs in setting priorities with partners and stakeholders conducting the work and evaluating the work.
- Maintain world leadership in agricultural science and education.
- Improving communications with the public.

Currently, members of Congress are closely examining the research, extension and teaching title of the farm bill. On September 25, 1997, the Subcommittee on Forestry, Resource Conservation, and Research of the House Committee on Agriculture will mark up its recommendations. In the Senate, S. 1150, introduced by Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee Chairman Lugar, is pending consideration. S. 1150 addresses new resources, collaboration and efficiency reforms, accountability reforms and offsets. As you can see, challenges translate into opportunities.

Another challenge before us is how to develop a wiser investment of resources, both human and financial, to continue our effectiveness in an era of tight budgets. The congressionally-mandated Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) requires that federal agencies develop strategic plans that correlate to the formulation of agency budget requests and that adhere to the “management for results” concept. This plan outlines our expectations for research, education and extension, including

a mechanism for assessing and redirecting agency programs to achieve strategic goals. We began responding to these needs in the 1994 reorganization effort. We need to reach out and build new, innovative collaborations across the public and private sectors. We need a better coordinated research, education and extension approach to problems of regional and national interest. We must re-examine our priorities and the contributions we can make to agriculture, people and communities. Education is the catalyst for responding to change and moving this nation into the next century. Integrated higher education programs will stimulate and enable colleges and universities to provide the quality education necessary to strengthen and replenish the nation's food and agricultural, scientific and professional workforce.

I view the complex challenges to agriculture and the continued effectiveness of the federal partnership as opportunities. We have a solid foundation from which to grow with change to create a dynamic new future. Partnership enhances our ability to proactively address critical national priorities, maximize resources and the benefits of research, and provide essential hands-on, problem-solving knowledge to the people of this nation down to the local community level.

At the federal level, we advance the cause of research, education and extension. We also provide answers to Congress, the White House and other government entities and we broker research, extension, teaching and land-grant system resources. Partnership positions us to truly make a difference in people's lives.

The research, education and economic (REE) mission area of USDA has a deep well of insightful information from its agencies, Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (CSREES), Economic Research Service (ERS), and National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), which is relevant to emerging public issues involving agriculture and rural America. The federal-state partnership rooted in academics and research can reap rewards by classifying and assembling information from many sources and then packaging it in the context of the information age so that it can compete with and complement non-scientific information.

As the newly appointed under secretary of REE, I am excited about the future of education and research, and look forward to overcoming the challenges that face us. The REE mission area has the potential to significantly impact the quality and quantity of scientists, engineers and other agricultural professionals for the next century, as well as to provide leadership to address the future of agriculture.

*Agricultural Policy at the End of
the 20th Century*

