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**PROCEEDINGS OF A SYMPOSIUM  
ON  
REGIONAL RESEARCH: LESSONS FOR  
A GLOBAL RESEARCH AGENDA**



Sponsored by the

Cooperative State Research Service  
United States Department of Agriculture  
and  
The North Central Special Committee

AAEA-CSRS Symposium Held August 6, 1991

Kansas State University  
Manhattan, Kansas

January 1992

WAITE MEMORIAL BOOK COLLECTION  
DEPT. OF AG. AND APPLIED ECONOMICS  
1994 BUFORD AVE. - 232 COB  
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
ST. PAUL, MN 55108 U.S.A.

## PROFESSIONAL IMPACT OF REGIONAL RESEARCH: LESSONS FOR THE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS PROFESSION

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### Introduction and History

This symposium is to help evaluate regional research as a viable model for conducting research with a national or global focus. The symposium uses a recent review of a successful regional research effort for seminar on the reasons why this regional effort gained its substantial scientific respect. Hopefully, this will give new insights into potentially broader uses of the regional research concept. It can also build on developing interregional arrangements discussed by Robinson and Farris in this symposium.

Regional research on dairy marketing was selected for the focus. Fortunately, several long-term members of the committees recently evaluated the committees' contributions and made judgments about reasons for their success.

This paper speaks more explicitly to the relevance of lessons learned and particularly to the impact of regional research on the professionalism of agricultural economists. The paper concludes with observations on the relevancy of these ideas as applied specifically to global research.

The regional approach was first initiated to respond to criticisms of excessive duplication in research carried out at the state level. Also, it was to respond to the changing structure of agriculture that called for research to be carried out well beyond state boundaries. These concerns were raised rather frequently during the 1930's and 1940's when research was directed mainly at local problems with the results put to use by local interests. This generally successful response to local problems resulted in a clear span of interest in supporting research that stretched from producer to consumer. Legislators and administrators at both state and federal levels were quite aware of these interests and Deans and Directors of Experiment Stations knew how to cultivate and maintain them.

Passage of the Research and Marketing Act of 1946 with its provisions for regional research ushered in a new way to attack broad-based research problems. A committee approach was used to develop project statements, draw up testable hypotheses, develop and agree on methodology, analyze data and develop conclusions. This was a major departure from the traditional, individual-researcher approach. While this approach was often more time consuming, it brought with it some substantial spin-off benefits. For example, little

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doubt exists that deliberations of regional committees often contributed to improvements in quality of other research projects carried out at cooperating states. In addition, interchanges among researchers often provided information that was especially useful in assisting with extension activities.

In reviewing the history of the North Central dairy marketing committees, several important factors contributing directly to their performance could be identified. These committees always had solid support of the responsible agencies of USDA. This situation was immeasurably aided by an enthusiastic Administrative Advisor who was a leading exponent for work of this committee. In addition, the committees had the services of an excellent Regional Coordinator who was also a researcher. Therefore, he was not just dealing with trivia and minutiae; he was an active participant. Lastly, they attracted a solid core of researchers who felt that the regional approach was especially effective as a way to attack problems encountered by the dairy industry. Members of the committees developed project proposals, identified objectives, agreed on a methodology, and participated in every phase of the research. Each of these links in the chain, namely Administrative Advisor, Coordinator, and researchers was important.

In addition, these committees gave some special attention to several longer-run occurrences that are inherent in the regional approach. One of these was the rather regular turnover of research and administrative personnel assigned to these committees. This was viewed as a normal occurrence for a committee made up of faculty members from various institutions, but it called for setting aside time for a "teaching/learning" process to assure continuity of research. These efforts were directed not only at new researchers, but also at new administrators. Again, the need to keep the various links in this chain enthusiastic about this work was essential for progress.

### Accomplishments

Through 1990, North Central committees produced two books, 46 refereed journal articles, 18 North Central regional publications, 203 state and Economic Research Service reports, 26 Ph.D dissertations and 36 M.S. theses. In addition, the findings were used in numerous extension publications and served as a major source of information when advising and counseling various segments of the industry. The regular and continuous output of refereed publications provided members with a distinguished publications record and was, therefore, viewed in a very positive sense by both junior and senior faculty. In looking back on the performance of the North Central committees, little doubt exists that they fulfilled the objectives of the 1946 Act by reducing duplication of research among the states and by significantly expanding the focus of research beyond narrow and local issues.

The question before this symposium is whether this general research model can be effective in dealing with current and impending issues and problems of national and international scope. Among the more important of these are such subjects as the impact

of new innovations, especially those developed through biotechnology, on food production and marketing; suggestions for low-cost sustainable agriculture; costs and benefits associated with use of fertilizers, insecticides, and herbicides especially those that involve the environment; quality of ground water and costs associated with its maintenance and improvement; society's real costs associated with animal rights; impact of dietary changes on demand for various foods and, therefore, on agricultural production and marketing institutions currently existing; questions about the possible development of new world markets for agricultural output; and international agribusiness management. Each of these represents major concerns for various segments of the general public.

### Some Suggested Adjustments

Developments of a research team to attack problems of this nature and scope will likely include a cadre of researchers, invited from many different disciplines and representing different institutions. Such a team will call for special attention to some organizational matters to assure effective and efficient progress on the research. Some experiences of the North Central committees can be especially useful in development of such a research effort.

One of the more critical tasks is formulation of the problem and clear articulation of the objectives. This formulation must be set forth in such a way as to attract researchers with the interest and skills to contribute to the research in a meaningful way. This is especially difficult when researchers from several disciplines are involved. In some disciplines researchers strongly prefer to develop research proposals that deal quite specifically with studies related to their own interests. These may not be the same as those set forth in a global research proposal. One criticism often heard about regional research is that the regional committee lacks a defined project. Therefore, members spend their time working on research that is of interest to them with little or no semblance of a coordinated regional effort. When objectives of the project fail to meet the interest of a researcher, it is likely that the researcher will provide only limited service and will most likely leave the committee.

Yet another facet of problem formulation deserves special thought. Statement of problems and objectives are often used by administrators to generate funding support for research projects. It is therefore important that these be articulated in such a way as to be understood and persuasive when priority decisions about funding are being made. This would be especially important in the presentation of global researchable issues.

Such an expanded regional research base also calls for some expanded responsibilities for the Administrative Advisor. This person is obviously the link between researchers and funding agencies. Therefore, the Administrative Advisor has major oversight responsibilities for the research project. The much broader assemblage of researchers, disciplines and institutions could easily bog down the process. More in the way of assistance for the

researchers is needed. The Administrative Advisor seems to be the only person who can firm up time commitments for the researchers with the home institution. He or she must get assurance that not only the time but also departmental help such as graduate students, travel funds, and secretarial services will be available.

The Administrative Advisor on most regional projects will also need to initiate more direct systems of communication with departmental chairs. One important reason why many active researchers shy away from regional committees is because accurate and meaningful reports of contributions to the regional effort, both positive and negative, are not conveyed to departmental chairs. An improved system for providing these reports should be put into place or else the best researchers will be reluctant to become a part of such projects. To keep a regional project active requires a real commitment by the researchers. These committees should not become a haven for unproductive or minimally motivated faculty.

A troublesome issue that frequently dampens enthusiasm of researchers for regional projects involves recognition of such work by colleagues on campus. This can be especially difficult for junior faculty who feel strong pressure to meet local promotion and tenure obligations. On most campuses, promotion and tenure criteria call for peer reviewed publications as the primary indicator of research output. This places some strong pressure on research output and on accurate feedback of contributions of each member of the committee. On some campuses, this may also call for special attention to the professional quality of regional publications and to the individual's contributions to multi-authored publications. Again, this points up need for an accurate flow of information that describes performance of members of the committee. A real need exists to communicate clearly and annually with those responsible for the on-campus reward system. This responsibility needs to be recognized by the Administrative Advisor. The best researchers want accurate recognition back to the parent campus and they want realistic opportunities for progress on the research.

In all likelihood, USDA research priorities are and will continue to be focused more on global issues such as those identified above. This presents a new challenge and opportunity for regional research committees if they wish to respond effectively. Research administrators and coordinators will have to take the lead in linking national and international funding agencies with university based researchers in such a way as to attract good researchers. Also, they must recognize more clearly concerns and professional interests of the researchers.

### **Some Specific Global Implications**

Regional research can be a rich professional experience. Dairy marketing research, given its wide spectrum of components, has a unique advantage for illustrating the value of regional research in adding professionalism to agricultural economics. The paper argues

with pride that regional research as demonstrated by dairy marketing research has much to add to effectiveness of global agricultural problem solutions.

The companion paper in this symposium by Robinson and Farris gives an excellent overall orientation to the potential of regional concepts in global research. This section will add some specific implications coming out of lessons learned in the dairy marketing case study.

Criteria for effective global research and development impact have been evolving over several decades of U.S. international involvement. Albeit, these criteria may have been blurred at times on the development agenda. But their relevance for the world research agenda is clearer. The international research center system with its many individual country satellites is a most impressive accomplishment. The United States can be proud of its part in both research and development. More recently we have had somewhat of a counterpart global development in the agribusiness management area.<sup>7</sup> This is providing some guidance for organization of research and development. Leadership is being given to the area by both the new International Agribusiness Management Association, and the American Agricultural Economics Association.

Five key needs exist for a powerful global research agenda in the future. They are:

- Professional talent development, especially of dedicated young professionals.
- International institution networks.
- Relevant problem formulation.
- Professionalism, resource follow through, and staying power, combined in an appropriate way.
- Individual professional worker payoff.

Lessons from regional research have remarkable capability to assist in this global structuring. Regional research has yielded many requisite building blocks for the future. Let us discuss them under the needs just given above.

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<sup>7</sup> Goldberg, Ray A. "A Concept of a Global Food System and Its Use of Private and Public Managers." Agribusiness: An International Journal, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1985 and Proceedings of Inaugural Symposium of International Agribusiness Management Association, Boston, Massachusetts, March 3-5, 1991.

### **Professional Talent Development**

For young, dedicated professionals, regional committees can teach professionalism. Regional committees have probably contributed more to teaching than to research. If this statement makes research administrators recoil, so be it; but we consider the statement a major tribute to regional research. Professionalism has been taught to young and old. It touched a lot of people, especially young ones who have been favorably marked career-wise by it.

Regional research can be a rich environment for learning. Good projects have a blend of theory and application. The young get examples and the old can be stretched with questions from the young. The often divergent point of view in the design of a project as held by those with large and small organizational backgrounds is helpful to all. The geographic diversity is a powerful illustrative type of learning in a regional committee.

The diversity of professional standards and credibility is a dominating rigor. "Show and tell" is a sobering reinforcing influence whether for preschoolers or senior citizens! The learning effect of it in regional research is powerful. Turnover of personnel is often a problem, but it has its good side in that it also gives diversity. The government agency/university interface may be at its best in a good regional committee.

The learning process for administrators may have been even more productive than for researchers. The cross-institutional administrative practices such as data processing, library use, and publication were most instructive for administrators as well as for researchers who became administrators.

The dairy marketing committees had many indigenous seminars with quite a professional impact on members. This group had a deep social and professional collegiality which was most helpful, especially for researchers from small institutions. Graduate student involvement was encouraged and was especially valuable to them. Quite a lot of interdisciplinary interaction occurred. This particularly widened the perspective of many researchers.

### **International Institutional Network**

Robinson and Farris speak directly to this. Also, some of us can say that the dairy marketing committees prepared us as much as anything in our careers for a wide range of international network building and evaluation responsibilities. Most of us were taught broader and better conceptualizations of networks and institutions. We saw more and better ways to get things done. We were taught to wrap things up. We saw the value of institutional pride. Most got some "hands-on" administrative type assignments. Visits to other institutions, government agencies, and industry gave additional "hands-on"



observations. Understanding institutional arrangements is absolutely necessary to building any global research agenda.

### Relevant Problem Formulation

Regional research is a fertile, rigorous teaching ground for problem formulation. Regional projects can become too broad and bog down. Yet, broad scope is by definition a natural characteristic of regional research. Many researchers get little of that elsewhere. International research agendas are large. Problem formulation in this broad framework is the norm. Yet, since they must be doable, regional experience can be invaluable in seeing that.

Regional research focuses time on broad arguments about problem formulation. Methodological options must be evolved. Professional dialogue and problem concepts take a lot of time. This generally involved a lot of conceptual courage. Broad literature searches for regional research led to better problem formulation. These committees had long tenure and continuity of members with good new infusions of conceptual ideas. They were rich in this area.

One author of this paper can offer a personal testimony. Fairly early in his experience with the global agenda, he agreed to become the research architect for a very large research priority setting project. The entire project outline was one sentence framed in a letter from President Ford, "What can the United States scientific community leadership do to help alleviate world hunger?" We had nearly a free reign to use substantial resources of the National Academy of Sciences including their great ability to garner additional scientists not only from the United States but around the world. We also had potential to marshal resources from both industry and government. We were able to conduct workshops around the world. In the process we used several hundred scientists.

The project resulted in what some in the Office of Management and Budget said was one of the most important impacts on allocation of federal basic research funds to that date. This project had great impact on several areas including biotechnology, nutrition, and food marketing.<sup>8</sup> The study is also credited with helping materially to put world hunger on the international public agenda. In many ways this was a gargantuan project. A key component of the model for attack drew heavily on the dairy marketing regional project NCM-12 and it worked!

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<sup>8</sup> "World Food and Nutrition Study", Report to The President by the National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences, 1977.

### Professionalism, Resources Follow-Through and Staying Power

Combining these in an appropriate way is a prerequisite for an international agenda. The global example here, of course, is the Consultive Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) with their centers worldwide. CGIAR has professionalism, resources, follow-through, and staying power.<sup>9</sup> It is reassessing itself now. It needs model lessons. The regional research of the United States has powerful lessons for use in this global endeavor. Organizational follow-through and coordination of the regional system by CSRS and The Land Grant Agricultural Experiment Stations provide a meaningful service and a powerful example of how to organize for professional thrust.

### Individual Professional Payoff

Modern research for most researchers is becoming more a joint effort. Individual payoff for most lies in the value of the group and the identifiable input and output components attributable to the individual. This is true both in public and private research. Carving up publications for the insidious business of enhancing promotions works against this. We should vote for relevance, not numbers.

Regional research has some problems with equitable professional rewards. Freeloaders can exist since administrators may not always send their best people. Some brilliant researchers do not want to bother with group activity. While turnover can be costly, sharp individuals can usually use turnover to their advantage. A few key minds can dominate a regional research committee and posturing can be tedious. Research can sink to a consensus-lack-of-vigor thing and projects which are completely lockstep can kill individual initiative. The dairy committees demonstrated that most of these need not be indigenous to the process. In fact, some of them can be turned to advantage.

On balance, our experience recommends to a researcher who has global aspirations to participate in regional research. We conclude that a bright individualistic, ambitious professional researcher can find few places for higher marginal productivity than spending some time on a regional committee. The applicability of such education for those who expect to work on the global agenda is great indeed. Few organizational settings exist where the potential payoff is higher for the time invested than on a top notch regional research committee. One might also add that if a researcher has administrative ambitions, global or otherwise, such committees can be fertile ground for developing and honing those talents.

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Centre for International Research, *et al*, "An Act of Faith -- Research Helps Feed the Hungry", Canberra, 1989. (International Centre for International Research, G.P.O. Box 1571, Canberra A.C.T. 2601 Australia.)

### Some Conclusions

1) From the effective work of these committees, one must conclude that, through the pooling of research funds and research talent as was done in these committees, high quality research can be stimulated on important researchable questions of regional or national importance. With this approach, researchers from a wide geographic region were able to collect data and test hypotheses that could not have been attempted or afforded within a conventional state setting. It also made available a cadre of highly skilled persons to assist in development of the research and interpretation of the results. This approach significantly enhanced quality of research and made it possible to study problems that could not otherwise have been attempted.

2) Because of the opportunities provided by the regional approach for in-depth deliberations about industry problems and research methodology, quality of many other research efforts in the region was improved. Ability of researchers and extension personnel was enhanced in assisting the industry in evaluating alternative solutions to problems that had impacts far outside the boundaries of any single state.

3) Curtailment of duplication made the whole research process much more efficient. Significant faculty time and research funds were saved in development of projects, development and pretesting of questionnaires, analysis of data, and preparation of a single manuscript. For the region as a whole, this represented a significant savings of public funds available for research purposes. This is also an example of what can be accomplished by effective networking among states in a region. An expansion of this networking is needed to attack global problems.

4) The regional committee approach should attract more high quality researchers who are enthusiastic about attacking problems national and global in scope than will occur by the random scatter of individual projects. To accomplish this requires careful attention to such factors as assurance of progress in the research, full and accurate accounting of the contributions of the researcher to the home institution, a real opportunity for professional input into the research, and assurance of interest from other colleagues in the field. To bring this about will call for more oversight on the part of the funding agency than has been the case for many past regional research efforts. The role and duties of the Administrative Advisor must be recognized as part of an essential and primary conduit between funding agencies and universities. Important information about the committee's performance must be reciprocal and flow freely.

5) The Regional Coordinator has a crucial role to play in this approach to research. A committee of this sort needs such a person to assure continuity and progress. To define the role of this person is critical and concern must be given to his/her opportunities for professional development.

6) Output of regional committees, especially multi-authored publications, must be given equal recognition with individually produced work on the home campus. If this is not the case, regional committees will have a difficult time attracting junior faculty. And these people often provide a real asset to both the short and long-run performance of the committee.

7) The regional research approach has potential to provide research answers to global problems. Robinson and Farris in this symposium develop much of the logic for expansion of these concepts to performance of global research itself. Also, one can argue that research professionalism could be upgraded globally in the process.

8) Much of the professional upgrading of global agricultural development needs to be based on scientific undergirding. While CGIAR has done much, integration of international research and international development is yet to occur. The professional upgrading impact attributed to regional research as discussed in this paper has a serious counterpart potential in international research and development. Also, the scientific impact of the regional research model has the potential to upgrade the professionalism of development work substantially.