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## **Cooperative Extension: A tradition of investing in California's future**

Seventy-five years ago, passage of the Smith-Lever Act completed design of what has become one of the nation's most successful institutional innovations: the land-grant colleges. Prior legislation had provided for instruction in the colleges and for research in the experiment stations to advance knowledge in agriculture and related sciences. The addition of extension services completed the triad and ingeniously bonded the colleges of agriculture, rural people, and communities through cooperative arrangements with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the state, and county governments. By virtually any standard, the results have been of immense benefit to the nation.

The evolution of the University of California Cooperative Extension in many respects parallels the development of California, its agriculture, people, and communities, as has been pointed out in *A Sustaining Comradeship: The Story of University of California Cooperative Extension 1913-1988* (Ann Foley Scheuring, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of California, 1988). At the founding of California's Agricultural Extension Service, the state's population was 2.5 million. One-third was rural. Other than in a few metropolitan centers, agriculture dominated local economies. By 1989 standards, however, the agriculture of 1913 was technologically primitive and labor-intensive. It was isolated socially and economically from other sectors.

Extension quickly became a powerful force in the transformation of agriculture and rural communities—a revolution of technological, managerial, economic, and social changes. Programs concentrated on increasing agricultural productivity through demonstration of improved production practices, short courses, “one-on-one” counseling, and other knowledge-building techniques. Home economics and 4-H programs to enhance the quality of life in rural households and careers in agriculture became important components of Extension. Campus-based specialists were hired to strengthen the linkage of county programs to the rapidly developing agricultural research programs on University of California campuses and in UC field stations. And Extension played an active role in developing agricultural and community institutions such as farm bureaus and cooperatives. In 1941, Extension Director B. H. Crocheron wrote with justifiable pride, “It is not the savings and increased income that they [farmers] so often bring forward as that the Extension Service has been a counselor, adviser, and friend.”

In the decades that followed, new technologies emerging from science-based research revolutionized agricultural production practices and, with them, the economic organization of agriculture and the structure of rural communities. Mechanical innovations reduced labor employed in agriculture, increased productivity, and enhanced production. The development of improved seed stock and a vast array of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, plus development of the state's water resources, transformed California agriculture into a capital-intensive, science-driven industry of immense productivity and diversity. Extension played a pivotal role in transferring and adapting these technologies to local needs.

With these changes, the rural population declined. While the real value of agricultural output increased 20-fold between 1910 and 1980, California's rural population fell to 9% and the farm population to less than 3%. Isolated rural life changed dramatically. Economic growth in other sectors, explosive growth in the state's population to nearly 24 million by 1980, and dramatic increases in ethnic diversity of the population altered the political, social, and economic landscapes of the state.

In part as a reflection of the changes, the title of “Cooperative Extension” was adopted in 1974. Extension programs focusing on the rural-urban interface, youth and consumer-oriented programs in urban areas, nutrition education for low-income households, special needs of small farms, and public policy issues were developed alongside the traditional agricultural production programs.

The strength and contributions of Cooperative Extension during the past 75 years derive from several sources. Above all has been its belief in the value of knowledge to enhance the opportunities and well-being of people. It has remained dedicated to public service and close to its constituents. Programs have been kept flexible and adaptable to changing needs. Its purpose has remained education, not regulation or advocacy. A close affiliation with campus-based research ensures a continuous flow of information to sustain local applied research and education programs.

What of the future? Clearly the status quo will not suffice. Cooperative Extension must continue to adapt to the changing needs of Californians. The state's population is projected to reach 32 million by 2000 and continue its growth well into the 21st century. With that growth will come increased competition for the use of natural resources now used in agriculture and forestry. Maintenance of environmental quality and the long-term sustainability of land, air, and water resources pose major issues for agriculture, indeed for all Californians.

Agriculture will continue to be dependent on new or improved production technologies to maintain competitiveness in global markets. But those technologies will need to be balanced against natural resource, environmental, and food safety constraints and objectives. Agriculture is now an integral part of more complex, interdependent, social and economic systems than was the case 75 years or even a few decades ago. Resolution of many issues “down on the farm” now requires reaching well beyond the farm gate, to incorporate interests of urban as well as suburban and rural people in both research and extension programs.

The creation and application of knowledge and development of human resources to enhance quality of life is as important today as at the founding of Cooperative Extension, perhaps more so. Whether through programs to enhance opportunities for youth, women, and minorities, programs to address natural resource, environmental, food, and nutrition issues, or programs to enhance productivity in California's diverse and bounteous agriculture, Cooperative Extension has a rich, 75-year tradition to draw upon. The future of the organization is what we choose to make it.