



J. B. KENDRICK, JR.

**Vice President —
Agriculture and
Natural Resources**

Agricultural policy center — friend or foe?

Public policy determination is the exclusive province of our publicly elected officials. Advocacy of public policies is the right of private citizens and their organizations; it is neither the right nor the role of public universities.

A public university, such as the University of California, is an instrument of the total society and belongs to all the people of California. It cannot be conceived of as serving only some segments of society and ignoring others, even though its programs may directly or indirectly affect particular groups.

However, research and analysis of public policies are legitimate university involvements. While little disagreement will greet this assertion, quick departures from consensus occur when the University becomes involved in policy research, analysis, and education. The apprehension is understandable, because it is sometimes difficult to understand and appreciate the difference between advocacy and analysis.

The boundary between these two areas is frequently indistinct. Policy proposals involve strong emotions, because when implemented, they affect people's lives, livelihood, and well-being. Policies are seldom neutral; if they were, they would probably be ineffective.

This is the situation as we endeavor to establish within the University of California an Agricultural Policy Study Center to serve the agriculture of California and other western states. The function of the center would be to provide information useful to policy makers and to those who are affected by agricultural policies. Although it would focus on research, it would also serve to train students and future policy professionals.

Somewhat surprisingly, the proposal to establish an agricultural policy center has created apprehension, perhaps because agricultural scientists traditionally have been advocates for changing technologies, improving biological systems, and altering farming practices. It is apparently felt that, if University researchers followed the same path in the policy field, advocacy could become a normal pattern of behavior.

The University would soon be viewed as a biased participant in public policy formulation and implementation. The reports, workshops, lectures, and other communications from the center could be mistakenly perceived as final policy positions, and the center could be viewed as a policy advocate rather than a source of objective analysis. It is therefore essential that any such center be structured in a way to ensure independence and impartiality. Governance must be such that it prevents advocacy of particular policies in the name of the institution or center.

Despite these potential risks, an agricultural policy center could serve a valuable role in the development of national farm policy, which is now dominated largely by concerns for the major commodities — corn, soybeans, rice, wheat, and dairy products. There is no question that these commodities are mainstays of our national agricultural system, but they do not constitute a good cross-section of western agriculture. Consequently, many policies adopted to benefit the large commodities may not adequately reflect the interests of western states.

Western agriculture, characterized by irrigation, rangelands, and specialty crops, is unique. It not only is vital to the economy of the region, but also contributes over 10 percent of the annual value of U.S. agricultural output. California alone produces more than 200 commodities, many of which are the sole or major source of supply for the dining tables of the country. Policies affecting the economic vitality of these commodities have impacts far beyond the West.

With the future vitality of American agriculture so dependent on sound public policies, the formation of a policy study center is both timely and appropriate. Its future is not assured, but it is promising. Its agenda can be exciting as well as challenging. If all parties concerned understood and accepted certain basic assumptions and limitations, I am certain that a University Agricultural Policy Study Center would become a valued friend rather than a feared foe.