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Agricultural research planning: a dilemma

The files of most state and federal administrators of agricultural research bulge with planning documents and statements of intentions, goals, and priorities. They encompass local, state, national, and even international concerns. Techniques ranging from simple to complex and elaborate have been used to determine research needs, assess existing capabilities to deal with those needs, and develop programs to address unmet needs. If anything, the agricultural research system is almost paralyzed by a plethora of planning documents.

It is ironic, therefore, to read the conclusions of groups inside and outside of government who have been assembled to assess agricultural research from impartial perspectives. Almost uniformly, they conclude that there is no national plan for agricultural research.

Planners react to such conclusions with dismay, frustration, and resentment. Uninvolved but interested observers react with similar feelings for entirely different reasons. "Can it be that the U.S. agricultural research system is in such disarray?" they ask.

I suspect that planning documents are either applauded or condemned, depending on whether they include or exclude items of special interest in the eyes of the beholder. For that reason, many plans are too inclusive and don't rigidly adhere to the priority-setting requirement. On the other hand, those few bold plans which attempt to set courses for new directions and exclude some of the long-standing "sacred cows" are resoundingly criticized by those who are left out.

It is time this dilemma is aired. Until some rational statesmanship emerges and exerts persuasive leadership, the confusion will continue and frustration levels will rise to the danger point among all parties.

Let me be specific. In a recent article appearing in *Science* magazine (220:1122-1125, 1983), entitled "Federal R & D and Industrial Policy," G. A. Keyworth, II, the President's Science Advisor, concluded that three unhappy choices exist for increased federal support for science. They are: (1) funding increases will be deferred until the science community can come to some consensus, or (2) decisions will be based on preserving politically popular facilities, or (3) disaffected minority viewpoints expressed to decision-makers will carry the

day. While Keyworth was writing about support for science in general, his conclusions are equally applicable to agriculture.

Now for the dilemma. The U.S. Department of Agriculture presented to Congress some months ago a consensus budget request for fiscal year 1984 to support agricultural research at state agricultural experiment stations and in the Agricultural Research Service. Admittedly, there were dissenting viewpoints on the budget within and outside the research establishment, because a number of individual problems were not specifically identified. However, there is almost unanimous "establishment" agreement that fundamental information is lacking to permit solution of many specific problems, and these budget requests reflected that fact. In June, the House Committee on Appropriations reported their recommendations on the proposed budget, categorically rejecting the ARS six-year implementation plan (heavily oriented toward basic research) in favor of the many specific agricultural research problems that remain unsolved. The Committee then approved 25 special research grants within the Cooperative State Research Service budget, other than those recommended by the Department of Agriculture, and reduced by 11.5 million dollars the Department's request for the Competitive Grant Program, which would have maintained a much-needed fundamental research base.

Once again special-interest politics prevailed, and Mr. Keyworth's predictions proved to be accurate.

The solution to this quandary will not be achieved easily, but if we know its cause, we stand a chance of finding its cure. Zealous pursuit of special interests that results in unraveling the careful planning of broader objectives will ultimately damage the capacity of the agricultural research system to function effectively for maximum societal benefit. Congressional representatives must resist the temptation to respond to expediency at the expense of longer term needs, and the research community must improve the way in which it describes the expected benefits of its fundamental research programs.

We must be selective, realistic, and understandable. Until some progress is made in solving this dilemma, research planning for agriculture will lack credibility with everyone.