

Toward a Systems Approach to Agricultural Policymaking

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To most people involved in agriculture in California, the manner in which public policy affecting agriculture has been formulated and developed is an enigma. Both federal and state policies—and the regulations that flow from them—have evolved in a piecemeal fashion, usually to contend with specific problems, often without awareness of possible indirect and detrimental impacts inside and outside agriculture.

Lacking a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting agriculture and their interrelationships, policymakers have not had adequate guidelines to the formation of forward-looking public policies.

A year ago, to help reduce the uncertainties in establishing effective agricultural policies, and in what I hope will be a step toward a much-needed systems approach to policymaking, I appointed a special task force to look into two crucial questions: What are the chief economic and social forces that will determine the shape and course of agriculture in our state in the next decade? What are the important public policy issues likely to arise from those forces?

The Task Force was asked to come up with a concise report, which would be of value not only in the formation of public policy, but which would also be helpful to the University in developing research programs that will best serve agriculture in the years to come.

The project, headed by L.T. Wallace, UC Cooperative Extension economist, was designed to draw on expertise throughout the state, in the private sector and in government as well as in the University. A summary of the Task Force report appears in this issue of *California Agriculture*.

The report does not provide final answers for the critical problems facing policymakers for agriculture. Those must come from elected and appointed public officials, and from the public itself. The report, however, does make available in one document the broadest view yet provided of the economic and social factors affecting agriculture in California, and of the resulting policy choices and their implications for agriculture, for consumers, and for the state's economy during the 1980's.

The information-gathering process used by the Task Force is reflected in the breadth and diversity of the report. It was written by a core group of faculty and others, working with 11 special study groups composed of about 200 members who were invited to participate because of their interest in and knowledge about the issues, and because of their diverse viewpoints. The study groups included farmers, consumers, and environ-

mentalists; representatives of agricultural industries, farm-worker interests and other private organizations; public officials at all levels of government; agricultural and other scientists and educators. The final report is a distillation of ideas, suggestions, and discussions by study group members, additional investigations and interviews, input from the core group, and a complex process of reviews and revisions.

Although various parts of the agricultural production, processing and marketing system are very much inter-connected (the chief reason why a broader approach to policymaking is needed), a detailed study such as this one must first look at individual components of the system. To do this, the Task Force report analyzes forces and issues involving water, land, energy, labor, marketing, food consumption, environmental quality, rural and community development, biological resources, and the development and use of information. Under these categories, specific agricultural policy choices for the next few years—including implications of action and non-action—are discussed. In addition, as the Task Force prepared its report, it became apparent that there are certain "pervasive" policy issues which re-appear in many of the subject matter areas. In many cases, these issues were not seen as most crucial within that subject area; yet, over-all, they may turn out to be extremely important in agricultural policymaking during the 1980's.

The most pervasive issue areas are:

- Regulation. More governmental controls in food production, processing and marketing are likely during the coming decade, because regulation is often seen as a partial solution, at least, to important social problems. On the other hand, there is increasing concern about rigidities and inconsistencies in the regulatory process, at all levels of government. Furthermore, regulation unquestionably adds to the costs of food and fiber production as well as the price set for the end product.

- The question of socially acceptable risk for public health, safety, and the environment. This includes both the "zero tolerance" debate, and, when tolerances are accepted, the need to balance opposing risks or to balance risks against economic costs.

- The need for a "systems" approach to agricultural policymaking.

- The need for more effective two-way communication between scientists and policymakers.

It is my hope that this report will serve well all who are concerned with California's agriculture as programs for the future are planned and developed.