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Where are we going?

When we set something in motion—whether it be an arrow, an automobile, or even a golf ball—we usually have some idea of where we want it to go. Even when we know where we are going, conditions and events can cause delays and sometimes prevent achieving the intended objective. An automobile trip, for example, can be affected by hazards such as weather, accidents, traffic congestion, detours, poor road conditions, and any number of other factors. But if we lack a clearly established direction or objective, we have less surmountable problems. We don't know how much fuel we will need, we can't anticipate hazards, we can't determine the best way to go, and we can't get there from here.

What is the point of this description of the obvious? It is simply to suggest that agriculture in the State of California, and for that matter in the United States, can be compared to an automobile in motion, but one whose objective has not been determined. The agricultural enterprise in California has been in motion for more than a century at a rate which has been accelerating rapidly during the past several decades, but we still don't know its route or its goal. We have spent most of our time and energy on factors which influence the rate of motion, but almost no time at all identifying its direction. Within the University the factors on which we have been working for the most part deal with increasing the rate of motion, e.g., increasing productive output, reducing the cost per unit of motion, removing the hazards, and perhaps analyzing some of the possible routes.

Other factors which affect the journey of agriculture are the availability and costs of the inputs which fuel the journey—such as land, water, mineral resources, financing, and a host of other important starter ingredients. Factors

which affect the journey, once started, include laws and regulations affecting resource use and availability, changes in direction brought about by changing conditions of labor supply, taxation policy, market variations, and even the weather.

It is time, however, to look at the agricultural journey as a total concept—start, rate of motion, direction, and goal. All events which affect this journey are interrelated and must be evaluated in terms of how they contribute to the journey.

The first thing we need to do to ensure a continued and successful journey is to identify our goal. California's policy makers, e.g., the Governor and/or the Legislature, reflecting the will of the people, must determine and articulate the goal for agriculture. I propose that the goal be: "Agriculture is to be maintained as California's major essential industry." There are many reasons why this is a justifiable goal, but that is a topic requiring another essay. Once we have established where we stand and where we are going, all those involved in or contributing to the agricultural enterprise would have an objective against which to measure and evaluate their decisions and their efforts. Knowing our direction and goal would be of immeasurable value to legislators and agency personnel as they wrestle with laws and regulations affecting use of agricultural chemicals, labor management, land use, water development, energy requirements, marketing procedures, research and education investments.

Until we know our goal, we will continue to evaluate each event as an isolated action complete within itself. This course of action can only lead to an erratic journey to nowhere. California's agricultural industry and those who depend on its activity should insist that its status and its destiny be defined.