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Priorities for Food Research

Several weeks ago, about 160 delegates surrounded by twice that many participants met in a 3-day session in Kansas City to discuss and identify the most pressing research needs to meet future domestic and foreign food requirements. The Conference was sponsored by the Agricultural Research Policy Advisory Committee (AR-PAC), a body with representatives from the Land-Grant and State University agricultural organizations, several agencies of the United States Department of Agriculture, and a representative from private agricultural research organizations. The Conference was inspired by the mandate of the Rome Food Conference of 1974 to help food deficient countries develop the skill and knowledge to solve many of their own food production problems.

The delegates were appointed by the organizations, agencies, and groups that were invited to participate in the Conference. They represented farmers; agricultural suppliers, processors, and marketers; consumers; nutritional specialists; labor; and international aid officials—the “users” of research. Whereas the users of agricultural research information regularly participate on advisory committees to the research organizations, the uniqueness of the Kansas City Conference was the prominence given the user group.

The participants by and large were from the research and extension establishment, and they contributed actively in discussions of the topics. When research priorities were rated, the participants' and the delegates' views were recorded separately. Electronic data processing equipment was used to reveal to the delegates the composite results of their days of intensive work. (The results have not yet been generally distributed.)

These diverse users of food research recognized that research priorities must involve the resources critical to agriculture—namely, energy, water, and land;

basic research in plant growth and reproduction; nutritional requirements of humans; and research on technology, resource management, inputs of food production, and soybean production problems. I was gratified that generally the users of agricultural research recognize the same urgent needs that the participants in research at the University of California recognize and are, in most cases, already engaged in researching: communication between participants and users is working. But we still have a long way to go to reach a satisfactory level of communication (both ways) with a very large user group—the consumers of food—but even here I see evidence of improved understanding.

A second major accomplishment of the Conference was the exposure of the user group to the difficulties facing agricultural research administrators and their faculties and staffs in reaching a consensus about the relative importance of the many research needs. The delegates identified enough research needs to keep the entire food research capacity of the U.S. busy for another century.

One word of caution is necessary. The Kansas City Conference addressed only one facet (albeit an important one) of research that is conducted by agricultural scientists—that of food research. Other vital research in which our agricultural experiment stations and the United States Department of Agriculture must engage concerns our timber and fiber needs, rural community enhancement, youth and family development, and the quality of our environment. If conferences were held on these general subjects, I am certain equally concerned user groups could identify other high priority areas of research. We in agricultural research management must keep our overall programs balanced, and must not overlook high priority needs in all areas where our faculties and staffs are capable of making contributions in the battle against ignorance.