Adjustments in Agriculture—A Challenge to Agronomy

I. Implications to Agronomic Education

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CHANGE is the most significant feature characterizing American Agriculture in the last 50 years and particularly in the last generation. Staff members in the Land Grant Colleges have not only witnessed these changes but have been in no small way responsible for many of them. These changes on the rural scene are found:

- in the methods being used,
- in the people who manage and operate,
- in the tools they work with,
- in the social and community life.

These changes are a part of America’s total economic progress. This progress has been a pleasant, satisfying, and challenging experience in our society. Contrasted with a static economy, we would have it no other way. Numerous yardsticks can be used to measure this growth and progress:

1. Population and our national labor force.
2. Gross national product (doubled since 1929).
3. New goods and services (through inventions).
4. Improved techniques enabling us to produce the same goods with fewer resources, or more goods with the same resources.
5. Capital accumulations.
6. Output per worker.
7. Level of living.
8. Educational attainment.

The sobering evidence is that farmers have not shared proportionately well with the general economy in this progress. Consider late 1955. Farmers were convinced that something basic must be wrong. They had experienced hard times before—but this was during the depressions in the general economy. But to experience sharp drops in income at a time when their output was at an all time high—when there was full employment—had the appearance of a paradox indeed.

The generally recognized problem of burdensome surpluses has caused debate on the political scene and has challenged individuals and groups to seek solutions to this dilemma. These problems and causes have been tossed on the door step of individuals, farm organizations, educators, including Land Grant Colleges, particularly agricultural research. It is well to note a few of them.

1. A good and responsible farmer at the National Farm Institute, Des Moines, Iowa, almost as if the individual farmer is on a treadmill, the faster he runs, the faster goes the treadmill, and he is nowhere. Even though his net income will be lower when a new practice becomes widely adopted, he may adopt the practice.

2. A Wyoming rancher recently expressed the opinion, “Sure we have to practice efficiency—it’s been preached to us by college people and farm magazines, farm journals, until it’s sticking out of our ears. But I’m convinced that the cattleman’s problems are bigger than efficiency alone will solve.”

3. An Extension specialist at Iowa State asked a farmer, “Have you ever figured out how much you have cost the farmers of Iowa in your influence on them to accept this production increasing practice?”

4. The report of the House Committee on Appropriations: “With farm income continuing to fall, it is apparent that increased appropriations for this purpose is not the answer to the farm problem. It is apparent that research personnel and county agents are limited in what they can do to improve the farmer’s lot in a period of falling prices, reduced acreage and increasing costs. These statements might be interpreted to mean that the agricultural scientist is indeed the cause of the surpluses. There is no question but that the rapid technological progress made in recent years has intensified today’s ‘surplus’ problems. The problem comes about because of the rapid adjustments that are required due to changes in technology. It is well known that individuals can and do make changes much faster than institutions or the techniques to adjust to the great changes that has brought.