Contemporary Issues

Congress and the Future of Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education

Terry L. Nipp

"Ask not for whom the bell tolls . . ."

The USA has developed a remarkable infrastructure to support agricultural production. We in agriculture can be justly proud of our efforts in research, extension, and education. The extensive, intricate programs that have been developed are the result of careful cooperation between universities, agricultural producers, and the agricultural industries. Of course, the success of an institution, as with any other living organism, is ultimately measured by its ability to adapt to new environments. Change and development are a necessary part of our institutional existence. Failure to adapt is the forerunner of extinction.

The role of government in determining economic programs in agriculture is widely recognized. However, the role of Congress in defining the "environment" of agricultural research, extension, and education is often overlooked.

It is understandable that we consider ourselves far removed from the political machinations that engulf the Capitol. Actions resulting from decisions made in Congress filter through many layers of intervening authority before being felt at home. Consequently, we tend to perceive ourselves as being equally removed from the decision making processes that affect us. A cutback in research funding may mean that we will have to lay off some of our support staff, or cancel one of our experiments. That's just the way it is. What can we do about it? Actually, as it turns out, we might have been able to do quite a lot about it. If we wait until policies affect our classroom or our research, then, yes, it is very difficult to protect ourselves. The flip side of this situation, however, is that the decisions that will have an impact over the next several years are being made now.

Just how well does Congress understand agriculture as it makes critical decisions that will determine our future? How well does it understand agricultural research, extension, and education? Do congressional staff members have the background and the information they need to make the decisions that face them?

Last January, the executive officers of the American Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America, and Soil Science Society of America, met in Washington, DC, to visit USDA officials and Congress members. In the course of the meetings, the officers presented information statements on agricultural research, biotechnology, water quality research, soil and educational needs and support to those legislators and staff members who have critical influence in determining agricultural policy. In addition, they wanted to get acquainted with these individuals, to understand their perception of agriculture, and to offer the help of the professional societies in providing technical advice and information. It proved a sobering experience.

Clearly, several staff members and legislators had a good understanding of the agricultural system and the research and education infrastructure that supports it. Others did not. However, several valuable lessons were learned from both sides.

CONGRESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES

On reflection, it is obvious that members of Congress cannot be experts on all subjects. Accordingly, they must concentrate on a few areas that are of strong personal interest, usually issues that are of great concern in the home district—the sort of issues that decide elections. However, each legislator will be asked to vote as an expert on an incredible range of topics. Members back home will expect to talk to someone who is informed and interested in the issues that interest them. Since Congress members have limited time and resources, they depend heavily on their staffs for background preparation, for filtering information, for working with constituents, and for attending to issues that are out of their area of interest. A staff member may have more than a dozen "topical areas" of responsibility. He or she may be responsible for issues ranging from nuclear disarmament to urban welfare to balancing the budget.