Communicating the Agricultural Research Agenda: Implications for Policy

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HISTORICALLY, the U.S. public agricultural research system has attracted critique (11). The latest criticism began in 1973 (7), and an active dialogue among organizations and groups comprising the policy subsystem for agricultural research (Fig. 1) has ensued (3, 5, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22). Criticisms greatly outnumber compliments, and concern exists about the capability of the public agricultural research system to meet the future needs of society (4, 16).

A new farm bill will be authorized soon. It may feature titles for new agricultural research, or for new methods to fund agricultural research. The certainty of new legislation provides policymakers and scientists the opportunity to assess the seriousness of current criticisms of agricultural research and to craft policies to address the urgent ones. The purpose of this communication is to provide a primer on the policy subsystem for public agricultural research, to discuss four contemporary criticisms of agricultural research institutions and scientists by subsystem organizations and groups, and to suggest some opportunities to address the criticism.

THE POLICY SUBSYSTEM

The agricultural research policy subsystem (Fig. 1) is comprised of, and influenced by, groups with competing interests. The organizations and groups connected by the outer circle are principally involved in determining what research title(s) might be components of the new farm bill, or what riders might be attached to annual appropriations bills. For each major piece of legislation, success in working within the subsystem is facilitated by knowing where authority, information, and jurisdiction reside. The subsystem operates by bargain and compromise, and legislative success is fostered by keeping the conflict among jurisdictions low.

The budget process (6) outlines the specific procedures for moving legislation through Congress. The process is closely mirrored by the timing, quantity, and coverage of media reports, and by lobbying activities of private sector policy groups and by state and local governments. In the 1985 Farm Bill, the activities of private sector policy groups were especially significant in adoption of research and conservation titles.

Several resource groups complement the agencies, committees, and organizations comprising the agricultural research policy subsystem. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) advise the Executive Branch on policy and fiscal implications. The Office of Technology Assessment, Congressional Research Service, and General Accounting Office illustrated in the inner circle (Fig. 1) are resources for the Legislative Branch and conduct specific assessments at congressional request. The Food and Agricultural Sciences and Policy Board (UAB) were established by the 1977 Farm Bill and redefined by subsequent farm bills to provide coordination on food and agricultural policy and private interests to the Secretary. These groups function under the auspices of the Assistant Secretary for Science and Education, and directly advises the Cooperative State Research Service (CSRS) on the funding of state agricultural experiment stations (SAES). After the budget containing this request has gone to Congress, ESCOP actively lobbies for its passage. Although NASULGC is a private sector policy group, it is separated from others in Fig. 1 because of its unique relationship as an advisor to a federal agency (broken arrow) and as a lobbying organization (intersection with outer circle).

The public agricultural research system has been constrained by constant-dollar budgets for more than 20 years. Over the past 10 years, numerous assessments from within and without the system have chronicled perceived deficiencies, and various structural or other changes have been proposed to improve effectiveness (1, 5, 10, 19, 20, 21, 22). More proposals for structural changes are imminent with increased funding, are impa...