

PRESENTATION TO THE EXTENSION WORKSHOP – OCTOBER, 1979

In the last 10 or so years, there has been a fundamental change in the relationship between the Agricultural sector and the rest of the Australian economy. Up to ten years ago, agriculture was responsible for about 80 per cent of our export earnings. Maintaining our balance of payments was a key issue in economic management and we were very dependent on agricultural exports to perform this function. The stimulation of production through increasing the land area under agriculture and by the application of improved technology was a primary objective of governments and this was naturally reflected in the approach of relevant government departments, including Departments of Agriculture.

The most significant reason for the changed relationship is the rapid development of the mineral sector and its contribution to export earnings. Agriculture now provides only 40 per cent of total export earnings and it is quite conceivable that this proportion will decrease further in the future, particularly if we develop our uranium reserves.

In addition, we have lost much of our traditional markets, and our farming is under continuous pressure from the steadily eroding effects of inflation leading to increasing cost pressures. Until fairly recently, farmers have been able to cope with these pressures by increasing productivity. Agriculture is now being asked to adjust quite extensively, to alter the structure of its production units, and to transfer resources, in particular, labour, to other sectors of the economy. Whereas in the past, national policy required the economy to adapt to the needs of agriculture, e.g. through exchange rate charges, subsidies, etc. Now the reverse is the case, agriculture is being asked to adjust to the needs of the Australian economy. I cannot see any reason to believe that the general trend is going to alter to any great extent. The pressures at any particular time will be influenced by such factors as seasonal conditions and market circumstances (international in many cases).

The pressures for adjustment in agriculture can be felt at all levels and in all areas. On farms, a positive management approach is needed, a more methodical approach to decision making, particularly concerning the allocations of

resources on farms, e.g. in the choice of enterprise combination and the level of intensity of production. There is still a need for a high level of technical ability - technical efficiency is still the essential underpinning of any input/output system.

The requirement by farm managers will be for more information, covering not only technical, but also socio-economic, financial and marketing areas including farm machinery, and better information, which is relevant to their situation. As far as possible, this information should be presented in a decision making framework, and within the context of the farming system.

The regionalisation program, with its emphasis on the provision of services at the district office level, with overall regional co-ordination and management, provides the opportunity to develop effective extension approaches more suited to existing and future needs at both the farm, district and regional community levels.

The basic service core will be the Senior District Officer supported by District Officers adopting a generalist approach within the whole farm context. The District Officers will come from existing agronomists, livestock officers, dairy officers and possibly soils officers. In horticultural areas, we will need to adopt a similar approach.

The farm should be considered as a system, reacting to external factors, and involving the management of the basic resources of land, labour and working capital to realise the particular personal objectives of the owners of these resources. In a family farm, the resources are owned by the family; however, we should recognise other situations where ownership of the resources is divided resulting in differing management decisions, e.g. sharefarming or co-operative farming. The whole farm approach should be capable of appreciating the interrelationships between the various components.

The decision making or problem solving approach is a most important aspect. The process of decision making is universal, of course. With farming, these decisions may be short term decisions on a day-to-day basis at the extreme, but mainly

being operational decisions frequently strongly influenced by weather conditions, eg Decisions about spraying for insect control and so on. Other decisions have longer term implications, e.g. decisions about crop rotations, machinery units, enterprise combinations, etc.

In adopting the whole farm approach - an appreciation of the need for a methodical approach to decision making, particularly those decisions of a medium to longer term significance, is fundamental.

In adopting a whole farm generalist approach, one needs to have a certain level of competence in the technical, economic and financial areas, and well developed social and communication skills. It is not necessary to be an expert in these areas - it is most important for the person concerned to be able to identify when the demand exceeds the level of competence. This takes some judgment and experience.

We will need to consider how intensive an approach at the farm level the Department can provide, given the availability of resources and other commitments. We shouldn't accept necessarily that resources are completely restricted, after all, this is a high priority area. Nor should we assume that we need to continue undertaking all our existing commitments in the future. Each individual will develop his own approach taking into account his personal talents and the requirements of his district.

Generalist district officers will need to be versatile and adaptable in their approach and work programming. District officers will be key operators required to deal with co-ordinated State-wide extension programs or programs dealing with emergency situations, eg. plague locust control, drought assistance programs.

They will co-operate in applied demonstration work - associated with regional research on farms. They will need effective specialist training and support service. These specialist support services in the technical areas could largely be provided

by research staff at research centres with extension specialist responsibilities, or at regional or district centres, or at head office, depending on circumstances.

If we are to successfully adopt a 'whole farm' approach, we must understand the management process, and think in these terms within the farming system. Through our approach, and our extension and educational programs, we will be emphasising the importance of management decision making within the framework of rural adjustment.

I have deliberately concentrated on the delivery of service at the farm level. The other aspect concerns the development of effective approaches to extension at district and regional community levels. This is already becoming more evident in the established regions. Our district officers need to be clearly identified as valuable community resource people, as well as sources of relevant and useful information and advice. The district office provides opportunities to fully utilise the team approach.

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