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for the West, about the West, from the West

Extension Specialists are an endangered species

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Wow what a ride! I retired from 37 years in the dairy industry last June, although it is hard to tell when I look at my half-time appointment calendar that is still pretty full. I enjoyed every one of those years – and more if you include the time spent milking cows to get through college. OK, “enjoyed” may be a bit strong for the cow-milking years.

Much has changed over those years in both the dairy industry and in Cooperative Extension Services of the land grant universities. Why would a young person with no dairy background like me choose a career in the dairy industry? I loved animals and came to Oregon State University in 1969 to become the best large animal veterinarian in the West. My grades in organic chemistry dealt that dream a blow, however, especially back then when only eight Oregon students per year were admitted to the Veterinary School.

Lots of challenges back then

As I went through my studies in animal sciences it became clear that there were a lot of unique challenges in the dairy industry. Providing adequate and appropriate nutrition to dairy cows is challenging, although not nearly so critical and precise as in beef cow-calf operations. Improving reproduction was the constant battle on dairies even 40 years ago. Beef feedlots and swine finishing didn't worry about this challenge, but swine was never a big industry in Oregon. Mycoplasma was discovered as a new cause of a deadly type of mastitis and a solution needed to be found. Automatic take-offs for milking machines were catching on and better milk quality was an emerging issue.

The dairy industry was a natural draw for someone who was interested in technology and fine-tuning production. There were many opportunities to help producers become more successful and that was my ambitious goal. Fortunately, a position with the Extension Service became available in my home county, a coincidence that not many young people enjoy. I was hired and began to “learn on the job” as I wrote in one of my first producer newsletters. I would learn later that the ultimate outcome of my job was to help the producer and to assure that the consumer had a cheap, safe product regardless of the change it might make in the industry.

“A greater percentage of rural land-owners today don't make a living or even substantial income from their land, but these people need help learning to live in the country. Many Extension Services have developed programs for these ‘small farmers’, but these extra programs take resources away from commercial agriculture.”

The Cooperative Extension Service was a brilliant idea legislated in 1917 with the Smith-Lever Act. The purpose of Extension is “to disseminate useful and practical information” to the public and it is administered through the state's land grant university. There is said to be a local county Extension office serving each of the 4,000 counties in the United States. The Extension service was designed to take information discovered in research universities to the people on farms and ranches and it has done so for almost 100 years.

My early work was providing dairy farmers the latest information and problem-

solving for their most pressing needs. Yes, I said their needs. A big part of the job in those days was finding out what would help producers the most and every farm was different. In the early years of my career most farmers wanted help with specific husbandry practices. We spent a lot of time at the kitchen table doing what nutrition consultants do for larger producers today. We balanced rations and evaluated the cost of nutrients in various feeds.

I also spent a lot of time working with dairy records and the successful Dairy Herd Improvement system. In those days the local “County Agent” was expected to be the local dairy association secretary and to even provide some management skills for smaller associations. There were always a lot of other questions on topics such as housing and ventilation, manure management and labor management, where experience and self-learning had to substitute for coursework that was not in an animal science curriculum.

Far more dairies then

One-on-one education was the desirable method of information delivery for many years, so we drank coffee at kitchen tables and met in small groups for lunch. Some producers took advantage of my help more than others, luckily for me. Back in my early days on the job there were five times as many dairy farmers (about 500) in my assigned area. Thus, at times some of the information was delivered by written newsletters and in larger group meetings.

Topics of that education certainly have changed. When I started working the Clean Water Act was only a year old. Producers now have more business management issues on their plates. Protecting the environment by complying with animal feeding operation rules, labor and immigration rules,

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managing risk with forward pricing, and assuring the best animal care the public expects are all daily concerns for today's producers. The way dairy producers receive information has also changed. More and more of them are using farm computers and the internet; they no longer depend upon the arrival of their Extension newsletter for new information. Most Extension newsletters aren't even printed today, but are posted on web sites. Information from many different competing sources can reach the farm quickly. A real challenge for producers today is sorting the grain from the chaff because anyone can put almost anything on the internet.

Cooperative Extension needs to reassume its place as the premier source of accessible, timely, and accurate information – this time on the internet. Extension information should always pop up at the top of the search engine list and consumers need to understand that this information is credible and reliable.

A new series of national Extension websites, such as DAIREXNET and the animal manure management site sponsored by the Livestock and Poultry Environmental Learning Center, are part of an effort to regain this trusted position. Each of these websites has an "Ask the expert" feature where one or more experts will answer almost any question. Unfortunately, this feature is used more often by folks who are not commercial producers, but rather have some unusual curiosity about the industry.

When I started with Oregon Extension there were about 10 agents working at least part of the time with dairy farmers, and two campus-based specialists supporting the work of those agents. Today we have three agents working with producers and only one of those agents spends more than half-time with the dairy industry. Most states are faced with the same situation of far fewer people to work with an increasing complex industry.

Reasons why Extension is fading

Why is Cooperative Extension, especially agricultural programs, on the ropes? There are very real concerns as I write this piece that the Federal Extension budget could be on the chopping block in an effort to reduce the deficit and government spending. There are at least six reasons for the change in grassroots support for Extension and their significance differs depending on where you live and work.

First among these reasons is that less than 2 percent of the population today has anything to do with the production and marketing of food. As the number of agriculturists has gotten smaller so has the political support base for Extension. With pressing societal needs and fewer dollars to spend, what may be perceived as a "nice to

have" service gets pushed aside for mandated programs. For example, In Oregon voters chose a variety of mandatory sentences for criminals a few years ago. Building and staffing prisons will soon overtake expenditures for education in our state. Makes sense, huh? Don't teach them; we can put them in jail later!

Secondly, a greater percentage of rural landowners today don't make a living or even substantial income from their land, but these people need help learning to live in the country. Issues involving good stewardship of the land concerning water, range management and livestock care have to be taught. Many Extension Services have developed programs for these "small farmers", but these extra programs take resources away from commercial agriculture.

Thirdly, as social structures change

there are new needs in communities, such as personal and social development. With these needs come new programs whose successes are more difficult to justify with current accounting methods. Educational programs that increase milk per cow or reduce somatic cell counts have measurable changes that translate into economic benefits. These benefits are easy to use in convincing decision-makers to provide funding. A successful program in youth development takes years to complete and the before-and-after benefits are much more difficult to document.

Fourth, Extension's role has changed over the years. In many commercial agriculture areas corporations and paid professionals provide the nutrition and management consulting that Extension used to do so well. International dairy suppliers can put on programs that are far superior to the ones presented using Extension's limited resources. Many of you saw this when Monsanto entered the market with Posilac and it had an interest in how successful a dairy could be. Extension still has a role in

the environmental, labor and animal welfare concerns, but those tend to be "have to" kind of topics – and it is difficult getting producers excited about "have to's."

The fifth reason involves the dramatic change in the way producers receive information. There has been a switch from face-to-face teaching and distribution of Extension literature generated directly from Extension, to the producer gathering information from many sources just sitting alone at a computer. Although many folks still prefer the personal touch in information delivery, it is more difficult with fewer agents and dwindling budgets for publication and mailing of hard copy information bulletins.

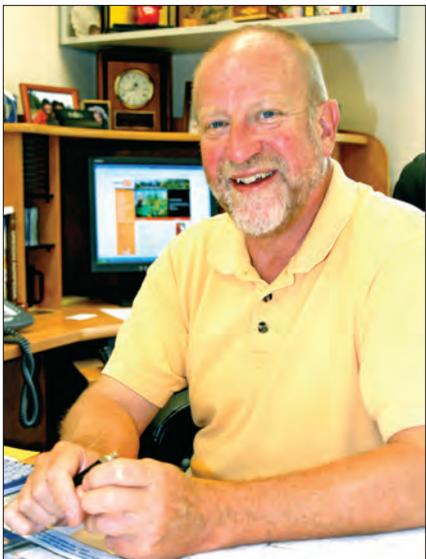
Trade magazines such as the one you are holding have helped distribute information from dairy specialists in hard copy to interested consumers. Articles on management can be detailed and read when the producer has time. I think trade magazine articles will remain an important avenue for Extension workers to use in reaching farmers with the latest research information. Convenience and concise delivery are important in these busy times.

A shift from outreach education

Finally, there has been a shift in philosophy at the land grant universities. Many universities embraced Extension educators as full faculty members. When this trend started I felt it good and that it would strengthen the relationship between researchers and farmers through the translation of research information into practical applications by the Extension specialist to the community at large. Unfortunately, Extension specialists have been sucked into teaching and research responsibilities at the expense of their outreach education programs. They are now evaluated on the number of scientific publications they write, not the economic help they provide in rural communities.

I think this is wrong, but it is not likely to change. These recent professional evaluation rules are made by traditional collegiate professors who are steeped in a system that goes all the way back to Europe. Most have a very narrow view of academic success. I was an oddball without a doctorate degree and both of my degrees were from Oregon State (a no-no in many professors' eyes). Yet, thanks to people like Dennis Armstrong who got me into their research projects, I was promoted to full professor in 1994. That would never happen today without extraordinary effort and performance by a young person in the Extension arm of the University.

Yes, things have really changed and I expect that they will continue to do so. A career in Extension requires a flexible person who is not intimidated by change and who is a life-long learner. I had to become an "expert" in at least four things as producer needs changed over the years. Reading, studying and observing successful producers were always part of it. It was the producers I worked for that made it all come together. They deserved the best and they appreciated it when I could help them. I was one lucky dude to have it all work out the way it did.



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