

FINANCING RURAL RESEARCH

Summary of Evidence presented to the Industries Assistance Commission, August 6-8, 1975 by the Tropical Grassland Society of Australia.

ROLE OF THE SOCIETY IN FOSTERING PASTORAL RESEARCH AND EXTENSION

The Society was formed in 1963 to further knowledge of all aspects of the production, management and use of tropical and sub-tropical pastures and forages, and to provide members with opportunities for the interchange of ideas and experiences relating thereto. Sections of the Society have also been formed in the Barnett and Mackay districts of Queensland. The Society has an international reputation and membership. It publishes a technical journal with wide international circulation and contributory support.

Any individual or company with a genuine interest in the development and improvement or use of pastures and pastoral products is eligible for membership to the Society. Its members therefore include farmers, graziers, commercial pastoralists, and business, extension and research persons or interests.

The Society fosters pastoral research and extension by:

- (a) conducting and sponsoring field meetings and seminars throughout the year,
- (b) publishing and distributing three times a year, a journal entitled "TROPICAL GRASSLANDS" which contains articles of scientific and general interest and the talks given at meetings,
- (c) establishing an additional communication link with members through Newsletters which are published quarterly, and
- (d) provision of a small library facility for scientific journals.

The above mentioned roles of the Society ensure close contact between and among farmers and graziers, extension, research and commercial people at a level which is outside any institutional boundaries or other constraints related to vested interests. This is of considerable significance because such an area of "neutral ground" previously did not exist. Nor was there a regular forum for contact and communication between such a wide spectrum of interested people. Thus the Society, along with its counterparts in many other countries, performs a unique and valuable function in disseminating information, providing a forum for the interchange of ideas both at a research and practical level and thereby helping to avoid unnecessary duplications of effort.

FINANCING RURAL RESEARCH

The Society feels strongly that the Australian Government should contribute to the financial cost of rural research to ensure a continuing and progressive research program. It is not only the rural sector which benefits from research in this area but the community as a whole.

It is generally recognised that expenditure on research and development "pays off". This has most recently been endorsed by the Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy in their examination of the National Science Policy for Australia (O.E.C.D., 1974). In their assessment it appeared that the overall support for research and development in Australia was close to world average when indexed against gross national product, though they recognised the difficulties of making comparisons on this basis. The level of support appeared to be reasonable for the primary sector though there were obvious areas for certain rearrangements within this sector.

The Society also supports the reasons given in the Green Paper for continued agricultural research i.e. 1. the continued maintenance and management of a primary renewable resource requires a background of research, 2. the continued adaptation of agriculture to changing markets and to rising costs of imports requires research and

3. agricultural research, in being strongly environmentally oriented, has an important bearing on our increasing concern for environmental issues and of land use alternatives.

Australia is almost unique in the range of climates and environments in which agricultural production is or will be sustained. Unlike other countries which are either entirely temperate or tropical, the Australian research effort must encompass this extraordinary spectrum of environments, product enterprises and options.

FUNDING OF AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

The Society supports the O.E.C.D. Committee's recommendation that the "tripartite" arrangement (i.e. Federal, State and Industry) for funding agricultural research be maintained at least at the present level.

The industry funding of research has some important advantages e.g.:

1. Producer identification with the research effort and its application is mutually stimulating and eases the burden on extension services.
2. Primary Industry leaders are involved with the management and administration of the industry funds and this provides a forum for meeting and discussion between government and others which may not otherwise exist.

There are also some problems:—

1. Research requires continuity of effort and funding which is impossible in a situation of fluctuating financial support or accelerating costs of overhead. It is therefore vitally necessary to have flexibility in the government's contribution to maintain this continuity.
2. The various producer groups should not be tied absolutely to a commitment they cannot afford in times of considerable hardship (e.g. the present beef crisis).
3. A single levy to cover all primary industries is considered undesirable on the grounds of lack of producer identification with the research and of the implication of such a levy as a tax.
4. Only the well organized sectors of the industry can maintain significant funding. Often the developing sectors are more in need of research funding which must initially come from government sources.
5. The O.E.C.D. Committee's report suggests the present system, while commendable, may not be sufficiently responsive to meet significant changes in world demand for agricultural products, foreseeable shortages and other world-wide trends. They imply this as an area for an Australian Agricultural Council.

The hard core financing of research should be by government funding. The level of support will depend on the complementary support from industry. Some areas may require almost all their support from governmental funding i.e.:

1. The desirability of promoting diversity in agricultural output, not only in economic terms but also to satisfy the demands of an increasingly sophisticated society. There is clearly a strong demand for innovative research in exploring and adapting new agricultural products to our extraordinarily wide range of environments and conditions.
2. Developmental research in agriculture is clearly of less importance in southern Australia than in the north. Any decrease in support for research in this area would seriously jeopardise present and past efforts and should be continued to the point of technological soundness.
3. There is a continuing need for trouble-shooting research in agriculture. This is probably best handled in the form of contract research which is suited to industry support. Some is carried out directly by industry, some by institutions such as C.S.I.R.O. and some by Universities. Much more could be done by Universities or tertiary institutes if some core funding were available to the establishment of Infrastructure.

Research and communication

Increases and decreases in costs and income in agriculture have an effect on the economy as a whole. Since the rural industry is widely dispersed and consequently relatively loosely organized it is vital that attention be given to effective communication both of research requirements and results and of changes in policy by governments and the reasons for them. Changes in cost structure in one sector of the economy can have significant effects in another (e.g. credit and exchange rate control, tariff policies etc.).

Reviewing Rural Research

It is considered that a national review of the agricultural industry could be carried out every 10-15 years and that this be comparable with the Green Paper. It is recommended that future groups commissioned for such reviews contain also a scientist, producer and industry representative.

REFERENCES

- National Rural Advisory Council (1974) — Communication in Agriculture. Report of a working Group of the National Rural Advisory Council. 37 pp. Mimeo.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (O.E.C.D.) (1974). National Science Policies, Australia. Examiners Report (O.E.C.D. Secretariat: Paris). 41 pp.