



Weak Links in Information

AT THE RECENT MEETING of the American Plant Food Council, a full morning was devoted to a symposium on improving agricultural public relations and information to farmers. Ed Lipscomb, National Cotton Council, says that the farmer has been put into the position of whipping boy through the type of publicity given to government supports for agriculture. At least part of this, he suggested, can be traced to the public relations efforts of other groups vigorously promoting their own interests. Some of this public criticism of the farmer could be remedied in the opinion of Mr. Lipscomb, by an organized public relations program devoted exclusively to making the public aware of the farmer's contribution.

We do not take issue with the idea of a public relations program for farmers, nor do we deny its possible value. Perhaps the urban idea of today's farmer is that of a relatively easy-going well-fed, Cadillac-driving citizen who spends far more time pressuring his Congressman to hold high-level price supports than he does acting as midwife to a brood of pigs on a cold winter night. For the benefit of both the farmer and the nonfarming public, a fair picture should be presented, and it is hard to deny that the public relations man is the prime weapon in many of the battles among groups for a bigger cut of the whole pie.

We do believe that there is a more basic area of transmission of information which is vitally important and at least as much in need of attention as is public relations. Stanley Andrews of the National Project in Agricultural Communications said during the same forum that the upper 25% of our farmers are pushing the colleges and experiment stations for a greater supply of information that will advance their farming practices. They are doing well economically, he said, while the lower 50% are inclined to be a drag on progress and are heading for economic trouble.

There is much talk of the farm price squeeze and at this moment rather sharply varying opinions as to how to beat it. On the one hand, we have the Congressional approach through high, rigid farm price supports. On the other hand, we have the campaign led by Secretary of Agriculture Benson for better farming, better marketing, and progress through research. The best procedure in an industry that is having profit difficulties is to reduce unit costs or make

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a better product. There appears to be a great deal of room for improvement along these lines in agriculture. Question: Shall we prop up the inefficient farmer or shall we encourage him to improve his efficiency? The answer seems obvious but the route to accomplishment is not so simple in practice as on paper.

Repeatedly we hear and read the recommendations of the agricultural experiment stations that show impressive possibility of increasing yield through improved farming practices based on existing knowledge: In Indiana, a 93% increase in the use of fertilizer would be needed to meet the recommendations; in South Carolina the increase is 265%. Similar recommendations apply to the use of agricultural chemicals and other improvements in the application of technical knowledge to farming. Sales managers recognize the possibilities of putting information into practice as seen in the symposium of the National Fertilizer Association meeting (page 667). Bankers are increasingly interested in farming finance with the aim of improving farm practice. Conservation of the country's natural resources—a matter of vast importance—would benefit. All agree that better farming is possible and important. The big gap at present is between the development of research knowledge and putting it into practice.

New knowledge is developed in the research laboratories and stations. Direct contact with farmers is by dealers in materials and equipment used on the farm, salesmen who travel amongst farmers, county agents, publications read by the man on the farm, and others at the direct contact level.

The bridge between the source and point of application needs to be strengthened in the interests of the farmer and the industries serving agriculture and, in their own self-interest, farmers would do well to concentrate strong and careful attention to that area in the next few years. Public relations alone cannot solve the farmer's problems, but the farmer can go a long way toward lifting himself with the help of those who deal with him.