

THE INFLUENCE OF AGRICULTURAL PROFESSIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

Farmers are increasingly relying on the private sector for their information needs. Farm advisers, through programs like the American Society of Agronomy's (ASA) Certified Crop Adviser (CCA) program, are increasingly being recognized as a profession. The primary mission of a profession is to protect the public's health and welfare. However, as farm advising becomes a recognized profession, there are many other areas that will be impacted. Such areas include public policy, extension/information transfer, research, undergraduate teaching, and scientific societies. Our conclusion is that partnerships between research/extension and professional farm advisers is key in helping farmers remain competitive in a global economy.

KEYWORDS

Farmers, farm advisers, professional, research, extension, certified crop adviser

INTRODUCTION

As the management staff for one of the largest agricultural scientific societies, we have observed over the past five years significant changes in the role of farm advisers. This paper is our perspective of how the development of farm advising as a profession will change agricultural policy and the delivery of information to farmers.

DISCUSSION

Farm advising is becoming a recognized profession in the United States, evidenced by the growth of the CCA program and its inclusion in major U.S. legislation. To be recognized as a profession begins with determining qualifications and setting standards. Professionalism is meeting those standards. The primary goal of professionalism is to protect the public interest. However, we believe that as advising becomes an established profession, the ramifications will go far beyond being a tool for farmers to determine who has the qualifications to provide them advice about crop inputs.

Gaining the public trust has been the major catalyst for farm advisers in the U.S. to organize, set standards, and implement a national program to administer them. The concerns about food safety and water quality in the U.S. were the major driving forces for implementing standards for farm advisers. It appeared likely in the late 80's and early 90's that because of these concerns, licensing of farmers and their advisers would be legislated into existence to control the use of crop inputs. Agribusiness was concerned that legislated standards may exclude businesses that sell products from providing input advice to farmers. The Certified Crop Adviser program was created by representatives from the public and private sectors in response to the concern that legislated standards were imminent.

Evidence of this concern is that, within a three year period, over 10,000 applicants from agribusiness input suppliers and manufacturers have voluntarily taken the CCA examinations.

Although the CCA program evolved out of legislative concerns, we believe it will have tremendous impacts on public policy, information transfer-extension, research, teaching/undergraduate training, and professional societies.

Public Policy. As state and federal government create regulatory legislation, professional advisers will be considered as part of the delivery system in regulations for pesticides, nutrient management, preserving clean/safe drinking water, and conservation. In the past, only agency personnel were deemed credible enough to be recognized in regulation. In the past year, crop advisers have been recognized in the 1996 Farm Bill and Worker Protection Standards.

Information Transfer-Extension. Information transfer in agriculture is changing. Illinois has eliminated county agricultural extension programs, New Zealand and Great Britain have privatized extension, and studies (Peter Nowak and Steve Wolf) and surveys (Doanes) have indicated in the U.S. that farmers increasingly rely on private sources for their information needs. The integration of poultry and hog industries further shifts information transfer from public to private sources.

As farmers increasingly rely on private sources for information, extension must incorporate professional advisers into their programs. Information transfer is not a simple one-way exchange of information derived from basic and applied research. Extension must aggressively identify relevant problems and the innovative solutions that originate on the farm and from their advisers. We strongly believe that extension can play a vital role in validating methods that originate from sources other than the land grant system.

Research. Precision technology for application equipment, planters, and combines makes every field a potential research plot. The private sector is aggressively seeking to expand precision agriculture. Professional farm advisers will have access, and perhaps own the rights to large amounts of data, with the ability to compare treatments of pesticides, nutrients, genetics, and tillage. Making sense of large amounts of data is a challenge that is a partnership opportunity for professional advisers and their research counterparts.

Teaching and undergraduate training. The basis of a professional program is developing standards based on the knowledge and skills needed to practice that profession. The CCA program has made significant progress in defining the requirement for advising in terms of soil fertility, soil and water management, IPM, and crop production. Each of these areas are defined by competency areas and performance objectives. Agricultural colleges and universities must base their curriculum on these competency areas.

Because these standards are based on the knowledge and skills needed to practice the profession, a competency based curriculum will provide students the best opportunity to succeed. Teaching the needed skills prepares students to enter a profession; students that succeed in the profession create a demand for more students. Universities and industry must participate in alliances to create and define relevant knowledge and skills needed to practice as a professional crop adviser.

Professional scientific societies. To date, agricultural scientific and educational societies are primarily based on publication of peer reviewed journals and presentations of research papers. A successful society in the year 2000 and beyond must develop services that attract professional advisers as members. By broadening the membership,

a society benefits in two ways. The pool of potential leaders increases, and there is more interaction between the research/extension communities and the professional advisers who increasingly are the conduits to the producers.

SUMMARY

Farmers will increasingly rely on professional advisers in the private sector for information about farming practices. The research, extension communities and scientific and educational societies must find innovative ways to partner with professional advisers. Through partnership, problems can be best identified, their solutions formulated, and progress evaluated so farmers can remain competitive in a global economy.

REFERENCES

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