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Clearing away confusion about agricultural research

For decades publicly funded agricultural research has been conducted in an atmosphere of respect and support. It has been recognized and highly regarded for its substantial contributions to this nation's enviable capacity to feed and clothe its people for a relatively small part of their income, and at the same time produce an extra supply of goods to export and at least partially offset a burdensome foreign trade deficit.

Today, in contrast, agricultural research is coming under increasingly harsh attack, accused of perpetrating all manner of "evils," from mechanization to chemical farming. Critics charge that agricultural research is oriented toward corporate-style agribusiness and encourages the development of large, profit-oriented production units; that it has been instrumental in the reduction of employment opportunities in farming; and that it has been responsible in part for "adulteration" of food and pollution of land, air and water resources.

The attacks do a grave injustice to agricultural research institutions. The false allegations create confusion and uncertainty, which undermine our record of achievement and can hamper our ability to carry on needed work.

What has caused this apparent fall from public esteem? Why is our once admired activity now in seeming disrepute?

No single event or situation can be identified as THE cause, but there is little doubt in my mind that it is a reaction to the technological transformation that has been taking place in agriculture.

Agriculture does not function in isolation. The economic pressures that have forced nearly all small-scale business enterprises to expand in recent years have also affected farming. To remain competitive in our free enterprise system they have had to grow into larger and larger units or develop a unique specialty that gives them an advantage in the marketplace. If anything, agriculture, as a high risk venture depending heavily on borrowed operating capital and on the whims of an unpredictable and uncontrollable environment, may be even more sensitive to changing economic forces than many other industries.

Research has responded to the needs of this evolving agriculture and has contributed to greater productivity and efficiency. As a result of the changes in agriculture, we have become a nation where less than five percent (some sources put it at less than two percent) of our population produces all the food we eat and the natural-fiber clothes

we wear. We are a country where more than 45 percent of the meals we eat are prepared in other than the family kitchen. And we are a people who expect to have available as a basic part of our diet every day of the year a consistent, safe, and low-cost supply of beef, poultry, eggs, dairy products, breads, cereals, potatoes, and even fresh lettuce and tomatoes. In an agrarian society, such a diet may have been taken for granted, but satisfying that kind of demand in our society of city-dwellers has been achieved only through production units large enough to produce the needed volume and at the same time withstand the economic pressures which make it difficult for many to survive. Industrialized agriculture and scientific technology have increased our productivity to the benefit of consumers.

We should not be complacent or unmindful of the problems that kind of farming provokes. Rural communities should not be disrupted, hazardous chemicals must be used correctly and safely, foods must remain nutritious and wholesome, environments must not be degraded, and our soils, water, and air must not be contaminated. Research needs to be alert to these adverse consequences when they occur or are predicted to occur. Our responsibility to prevent them should remain just as firm as is our goal to keep agriculture productive and economically healthy.

We in publicly supported research institutions need to keep our aim on the total public benefit. We should be dedicated not only to the adequacy of our country's food and fiber supplies but also to the well-being of the environment and social structure in which they are produced.

Agriculture has changed dramatically in the past 25 years; the basic mission of agricultural research has not. Our fundamental purpose remains to improve productive efficiency on our farms, to conserve our resources, and to protect the environment, in the interests of all citizens.

In order to communicate that fact, our deeds must speak for us. In this way we can regain the public confidence we need to deal with the problems before us.

I am confident that we can overcome the distrust and confusion that are being created in the public mind. Agricultural research has done its job, far more effectively and with far greater benefits to our society than any comparable publicly funded undertaking in our history.

And that is the record on which we will ultimately be judged.