

Panel: CES Public Policy Education Role

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Stakeholders have always been involved in public policy education. In our vast farm – to - health food system, we are all consumer stakeholders. Many of us have other roles: farmer, retailer, restaurant manager, wholesaler, researcher, educator, inspector. Stakeholder input is clearly important in developing Extension Public Policy Education strategies. One step in defining stakeholders is to define carefully the terminology we use. A consistent use of terms in the Extension system is needed. From there one needs to take a look at the entire food system, not just one phase of it and begin to discuss how to approach education strategies across the system.

Let's look at the term "agrosecurity", a short form of "agricultural biosecurity." One white paper found on the USDA website states: "The primary goal of any successful agricultural biosecurity program is to prevent entry of a pathogen or pest into a susceptible population of plants or animals." I think that today, in this conference, we must approach agrosecurity from a much broader systems perspective. We, all of us, are stakeholders in policy related to the well-being of our food supply. And that food supply needs protection beyond the stage of producing plants and animals.

The terrorism of Sept 11, 2001 thrust horrible tragedy into our world, shaking us for a time, at least, out of our complacency. As Americans, we frequently take many things for granted, including "food security" (as USDA already uses this term) - - access to sufficient food - - even as we see homeless and hungry people in our communities, or as we avoid them by not driving downtown. We also expect our food to be safe, every time, and we count on a huge variety of foods to be available when we shop the supermarket. We also have taken for granted "agricultural and food security"....protection of our food supply from intentional contamination. I like the inclusion of "food" into the term. All of us eat food, and our public policy education must not stop with agriculture or even with products inspected and under the jurisdiction of the USDA. If we use a systems approach instead on an agency approach, we will have broader programs with more buy – in from people who consume the products processed from commodities.

We now know terrorist attacks can occur in the US. I would rather hope attacks won't happen again, or that they happen somewhere else, not in my country, and not in my backyard, Kansas, the heartland and part of the nation's breadbasket. Today, however, many believe that it is not a matter of whether some kind of

attack on our food supply will occur....but when. Thus, we encounter another term, "food bioterrorism".

Our vast food system has been open. Drive by any farm during summer growing season and see that the crops and animals are accessible, just across the ditch and maybe, a short fence. Processing plants have been further off the screen, due to their presence in industrial parks rather than in our neighborhoods. Many that were previously open to the public for tours have ceased to allow the curious to watch hundreds of thousands of candies pass by on a conveyor or the makings of flaked corn breakfast cereal. Now, they operate under lock and key and require proper identification for admittance. These policies keep out both the prying eyes of competitors and unwanted persons who desire to do harm.

The Office of Homeland Security is being formed which will include some agencies and programs of long-standing federal Departments with responsibilities for safety of the food supply. Both the FDA and the USDA have "food security" (another use of the term) guidance for processors of food and meat/poultry. These documents are readily found on the web. Trade associations are providing information and guidelines for their industries. State departments of health and of agriculture are gearing up to provide additional information, regulation, education, and coordination within their jurisdictions. And, the Congress passed a new law, the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002 (PL107-188) that will require registration by companies, and give much greater power to the US Food and Drug Administration, among other things.

In recent years there has been a huge growth in organics. Markets such as Wild Oats have attracted many upscale, well-educated customers who want attributes such as food produced closer to home, hormone-free meats, pesticide-free products, or foods grown outside the corporate, factory-farm context. Today, another reason exists for consumers to want to purchase, if not organics, food that has been produced close to home. Farming operations have consolidated and gotten larger, and so have food processing firms. If a dairy plant in Chicago has contaminated milk, that milk may be distributed to markets in the entire central part of the US, affecting millions of Americans. In years past, a dairy with contaminated milk might have affected only markets within a few communities or surrounding counties. Thus, as operations expanded and consolidated, problems that occurred affected larger volumes of food, and potentially, more consumers could be harmed. Today, one might say that mass production could lead to mass destruction. Less ownership diversification leaves us more vulnerable. Consumers may create more of a swing back toward independent farming operations and actively seek farmers near them who will sell directly to them, thus avoiding some of the products of large corporations. That trend was in motion well-before 9-11. The current situation and concerns for terrorism may add impetus to this trend. The term "consumer driven agriculture" comes to mind.

Consumers today produce very little food themselves. I myself have six tomato plants, asparagus, onions, garlic and some herbs. Enough to provide some fresh produce during the growing season. The food industry is probably the largest industry in the world with millions of personnel in a myriad of positions and roles. And, we consumers, even those of us who work in the food industry, are all dependent on our food system to live. This system must be protected, and it must be able to respond to wide-scale emergencies.

What is our Extension role in all of this? Probably multiple roles, depending on where one is located in the Extension system - - county, area, state; one's clientele groups and one's subject matter expertise. Will you be providing education to food processors on new regulations brought on by the new bioterrorism law, working with the health department and restaurants in your community or teaching farmers and stockmen how to protect their crops and livestock from terrorist attacks on the farm? Will you help organize public policy education programs that utilize some alternatives/consequences models of public issues education? Will you provide leadership at state or county levels to bring about coordination and interaction among various agriculture specialists, food specialists, policy specialists, farmers, retailers, restaurateurs, agencies, consumers and other stakeholders who each have a piece of this food pie? How will we Extension colleagues interact with agencies that already have responsibilities for emergency preparedness? Or responsibilities for regulation of various aspects of the agricultural and food industries? What will be our role(s) with our various clientele, all of whom are also consumers?

This, I think, is the challenge that lies before us. . . determining Extension's roles. And, designing public policy education programs to help us define those roles would truly provide a solid sense of direction and integration, and foster commitment from many stakeholders.