The commodity approach to extension agronomy programs

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ABSTRACT

The commodity approach has become recognized as an effective arrangement to 1) identify priority problems which are multiregional or national in scope, 2) create educational materials, and 3) design programs to complement and supplement existing extension materials and programs. Interdisciplinary groups or task forces are natural organizations to develop extension educational materials, programs, and activities to help commodity producers solve problems. Extension agronomists experienced with the commodity approach were surveyed, and some of the responses are reported here. Three commodities, cotton, soybeans, and wheat are used as examples of how this approach works nationally. Experiences of State Cooperative Extension Service specialists and Extension Service-USDA specialists were solicited and are summarized.

Additional index words: Survey of extension personnel, Organization of extension activities.

The commodity approach to extension agronomy has been practiced for a number of years. It is recognized as an effective organizational arrangement to focus on problems in order to carry out extension education and to prepare information materials. The approach is one of several ways in which extension activities may be organized. It is defined as an interdisciplinary staff arrangement by commodities, and brings together representatives of two or more disciplines to accomplish specific extension educational objectives. Other possible approaches are by discipline, geographic region, and by combinations of these staffing structures. The commodity approach is not presented to extension specialists as the only approach or the only way to organize for planning and conducting extension agronomy. Of necessity, much of extension work is performed individually. This is the situation particularly with specialists in broadly based disciplines such as soils, plant pathology, entomology, and agricultural engineering. These disciplines must include several commodities. Specialists will be limited in the number of commodities in which they can deal in a multidisciplinary setting. Nevertheless, the commodity approach is used successfully.

In reviewing the functional arrangements to conduct commodity educational work, we generalized that:

1. State extension specialists from several disciplines are organized on a commodity committee such as corn, soybeans, forages, and others. The group may be referred to as a work group or task force.

2. A commodity specialist is designated to work with soybeans, peanuts, or cotton. The commodity specialist then draws on specialists from several disciplines such as soils, agronomy, agricultural engineering, farm management, and marketing for preparing subject matter materials, conducting demonstrations, meetings, and other activities.

A brief questionnaire was mailed to a selected sample of state extension specialists in agronomy requesting a report on their experiences in the commodity approach. Commodities included corn, soybeans, wheat, barley, grain sorghum, cotton, hops, millet, alfalfa, dairy, sugarbeets, forages, small grains, and turf.

NATIONAL COMMODITY PROGRAMS

The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) since the late 1960's has conducted national commodity programs in cooperation with producer leadership in a limited number of commodities. Such an approach has become recognized as an effective means of identifying priority problems which are multistate, multiregional, or national in scope. This approach also facilitates the creation of educational materials and extension programs to complement and supplement existing materials and activities and to strengthen the total CES effort.

Some of these activities have been conducted nationally with commodities:
1. Wheat, in cooperation with the National Association of Wheat Growers.
2. Soybeans, with the American Soybean Association.
3. Cotton, with the cotton producer groups.
4. Potatoes, with the National Potato Council and the Potato Board.

Some of the reasons for conducting these extension programs on a commodity basis includes the following:
1. Many of the problems facing extension agronomy clientele cross state or regional boundaries, and many are national in scope.
2. Commodity organizations have grown in recent years, in state organizations as well as nationally. Due to the increased complexity of producer problems and with a limited staff available in the CES for work with commercial agriculture, the commodity approach is favored. This approach offers an opportunity to draw on extension specialists with the expertise and knowledge to deal with the problems and to help strengthen extension programs and better support U.S. agriculture.
3. The commodity approach offers opportunities for a better understanding of extension programs by agricultural leaders. These leaders can help in identifying problems and in evaluating educational activities which are designed to help solve these problems.
4. The commodity approach captures the producer’s attention. As one of the state extension agronomy specialists states, “Requests for these programs have expanded beyond our ability to meet them because of time and staff limitations.” Another specialist stated, “Farmers seem to like the commodity approach better than the discipline approach.”

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

The questionnaire asked to report Extension materials, activities, visual aids, and other items prepared or carried out during the past year in the commodities listed. Responses included demonstrations, production clinics, area schools, management clinics, radio and TV programs, producer meetings, and seminars.

Educational materials prepared included handbooks, slide sets, summaries of variety and yield trials, bulletins, guide sheets, newsletters, news releases, radio scripts, and other mass media materials. Several of these respondents enclosed examples of educational materials with their questionnaire. Frequently, these materials had multidisciplinary authors. For example, the authors of one of the soybean handbooks had eight disciplines represented.

MANY DISCIPLINES INVOLVED

The questionnaire asked “did you work with other disciplines in such programs?” Eighty-six percent of the respondents said yes, and the average number of disciplines involved was six. Another question related to whether or not the commodity approach encourages multidisciplinary work. All respondents answering this question said yes. Some comments were:
1. The various disciplines always have worked well together.
2. The multidisciplinary work on corn was begun in 1952 with a complete production approach called the “pacemaker” corn project. It pulled together the various departments to make a complete package.
3. Producers are more interested in a commodity approach to problem solving and are willing to support research and extension activities. Specialists in a scientific discipline are appreciative of the help of a crop generalist.

EFFECTIVENESS

Everyone is concerned about the effectiveness of extension methods and the tools used in extension agronomy education. The questionnaire asked for a rating of the effectiveness of the commodity approach into five categories: superior, above average, average, below average and inferior. A superior rating was given 61%, above average 23%, and average 16%. None of the respondents rated the commodity approach as being below average or inferior.

PLANNING ASSISTANCE

The commodity approach offers the opportunity to make effective use of commodity organizations, producer groups, and others to advise and counsel in planning and evaluating agronomy extension. These planning groups may be in the form of an advisory or steering committee, or a committee of the commodity organization. The group is appointed for the specific purpose of advising and counseling extension program leaders and specialists on commodity education activities. When producers are involved in program planning they are more likely to be interested in the activities and materials. They will be a participating audience at clinics, seminars, demonstrations, and other activities related to the commodity.