

THE CASE FOR BEING CANDID

by

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I was talking with a staff person on a legislative committee a short time ago about the severity of the tax burdens being placed on farmers these days, especially by the market-level revaluations that have been done by consulting firms in some counties and towns. He did not deny that taxes on farms are going up faster than taxes on other classes of property. But he did dismiss me and my arguments by a carefully worded response that in effect said, "You guys from the College of Agriculture are always trying to wrangle another dollar for farmers."

Suddenly I realized how often of late I had been hit over the head with this idea -- the idea that research and extension work in agriculture has as its primary goal the production of new machines, crops, pesticides, or laws for the benefit of farmers. And the clincher at the end of the statement, expressed or implied, is a question: "Why should so many tax dollars go for helping such a small group of people?"

Actually, of course, food would be far more expensive in this country today if it were not for the technology, management principles, and laws that we have developed and promoted. We have contributed more to reducing the cost of food than to fattening farmers' pocketbooks. How did we get labeled as advocates, apologists and co-conspirators of farmers as a special interest group?

Perhaps it is because this is the label we have given ourselves. We have said we were helping farmers. We have even felt we were helping farmers. This has made us more effective in getting farmers to adopt new technology and new ideas rapidly.

But the truth is that our help has hurt more farmers in the past three-quarters of a century than it has profited. Our new technology and ideas have displaced more than now remain farmers. What help we have provided has mostly helped some farmers out-compete others, under conditions in which the resulting overall gains in efficiency lead in the long run to price reductions that benefited only consumers.

Unfortunately, consumers are not fully aware of this and we now hesitate to push hard for their recognition of it. Having said we were helping farmers, we now worry lest a claim we really were helping consumers could be interpreted as a betrayal of the farmers' trust in us.

But should we be so hesitant? Would we really lose farmer support if we were more candid? What specifically could we gain by such an approach?

The gain, I think, is clear. Our work really does touch the lives of all people. Everyone eats. And we do know more about food -- how it is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed -- than workers in any other major institution so far created. With this approach we can promise to do something for everyone and do it very well. We will not be forced, as we now seem to be, to promise to be all things to all people to justify our existence. The honest pursuit of even a narrow objective, when it is important to everyone, should give us more legitimacy than global promises we cannot deliver on.

Would this approach lose us farmer support? I don't think so. Farmers are pretty sophisticated these days. They know who benefits in the long run from new technology. And they know too that, while new technology will disadvantage some farmers in any area, the absence of new technology will disadvantage all farmers in that area, since they will lose out to farmers in other states or counties, or even foreign countries, where access to new technology is better.

An approach in which we emphasize our commitment to assuring a high quality, low cost food supply is honest and valid. It can pave the way for increasingly fruitful discussions with people in all walks of life outside agriculture. It is not a betrayal of farmers' trust. Instead it can increase our effectiveness in presenting the farmers' point of view. And farmers will accept it.