

CONCLUSION OF THE 1987 NASS CONFERENCE

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE--GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

I've faced two real challenges in this four day conference. On Tuesday, my remarks followed a very inspiring discussion by Eric Winslow on "Managing Change." Today I'm following Jim Bonnen's "A Critique" which as always included some outstanding insights which if we follow will help us better prepare for the challenges of the 1990's. Ewen Wilson wanted very much to join us for several days at this conference. However, the challenge he faces in carrying two jobs and the many critical decisions being made on aspects of the farm bills (that John Marten indicated are due out this week) made it impossible for him to be here.

Did you notice how we had a typical statistical problem here this week? It involved drawing inferences when you have only a portion of the statistical sample included in your analysis--after the first three days of this conference with Barrett, Olson, and Suter as moderators, I thought one had to have white hair to handle this task. My preliminary inference was either incorrect or Dantzler has on a wig or has dyed his curls.

We owe some very special thanks to Bob Beach, Jane Abbate, and Barbara Mundell for taking care of our every needs during both the formal and hospitality periods. Our host, Dennis Findley, also deserves a hearty thanks for all his efforts. When you want to get something done, assign it to the person who has the largest load--Dennis has had that this past 15 months with SSO structure, State budget difficulties, cattle inventory review, and now the national conference--Thanks a Heap!!! Our conference planning and coordinating committee also did an outstanding job in developing the program and selecting the resource people.

Thanks to all the outside participants who have stayed with us for the full conference--Jim Bonnen, Bud Pautler, and Danny Triandafillou. Your presence, thoughts, and interactions all add immeasurably to the substance of our meetings. I know you all join me in expressing appreciation to the NASS players--who gave lots of personal time--in helping us see ourselves better at the banquet last night. I'm sorry we didn't have that taped to share with our entire staff.

IMPORTANT SUBJECTS NOT ADDRESSED

Three subjects that will be very important to the Agency over the next decade that were passed totally or touched on lightly are: (1) remote sensing, (2) international technical assistance, and (3) the new immigration bill. The Agency must continue to invest resources in remote sensing technology to make the operational procedures (features) more efficient. This technology is giving us the best State level data we have on crop acreages in our survey system in terms of quality. In fact, it's the only one in our survey system that measures up to the statistical standard goals we have established for all our survey systems and is one survey where we could publish the actual survey indications and stand solidly behind them.

International technical assistance in building host country agricultural statistics systems will continue to be a key responsibility for NASS. The activity provides valuable experience for our staff, pays lots of bills for us, and gives outstanding assistance to

developing countries. As in remote sensing, it has helped us establish an international professional reputation that we must maintain and share.

Implementation of the 1985 immigration legislation is underway in several departments. The seasonal agricultural worker portion is a sensitive issue with farmers. Although the Department of Labor has the lead role in implementation, USDA will have responsibility for all the policies and programs for the ag sector. We have asked for the resources to collect, tabulate, and analyze the diverse data needed by the Department for administering this program. Since it has a quick implementation date, it's going to develop fast and there will be little time for detailed planning.

CONFERENCE OBSERVATIONS

Dennis Findley got us off to a good start in his introduction by weaving recent Texas economic experiences in with our conference theme. He truly let us know we were in Texas when he described that Texas turkey that was so large it fed a family for a whole year. Eric Winslow was a great help in setting the tone for our conference. He pointed out many techniques, hurdles, considerations, and perceptions we need to remember as we try to lead our respective units. We as individuals set the climate for our organizational units by the way we behave and do things--work ethics, confidence, team spirit, staff development, statistical standards are a few items that come to mind. We have seen lots of visions from our infinite number of recent task forces, and those who have presented conference topics here in Houston. I hope we will leave this meeting vision driven rather than procedure driven. Each of our organizational units face the challenge of change from QAS, IRM, ASB, CATI, D.C. and SSO structure, FERS, confidentiality, and statistical standards. The key to what Eric said about challenge is its a two way street--(a) management has a responsibility to do a good job communicating to and involving staff in change and decisions, and (b) staff has a responsibility to think of the organization as a whole (not just parts) and work to understand how things will operate as changes occur. Bob Robinson noted the ERS proposed organizational changes and how they will impact the way it operates. The planned changes are top down rather than bottom up as NASS operated.

We received from Keith Collins a good description of the dilemmas that our farmers and policy officials face in today's ag sector. Our focus must stay on the whole of agriculture and its associated industries, not individual commodities; and our farmers and leaders must work together. All of us should feel more confident about the work of the Economic Analysis Staff knowing that Keith is there to guide Department studies and analyses.

I'm sure you observed that Ron Knutson had given some study to the importance of agricultural data and challenges we will experience in the next decade. It was also apparent that Ron had read many of the papers Jim Bonnen wrote in the mid-1970's. A great deal of what Ron said also paralleled recommendations from the Secretary's Economic Statistics Review Panel. We must be competitive in the service we provide and do have a reputation for quality service to protect. There has been recent pressure for us to become responsible for poultry slaughter, MP 404 processed meat reports, and retail beef prices now done in other agencies. These proposals should be taken as compliments to the Agency that when it takes on a task it's done correctly.

We can all learn from periodic contacts with experts like Charles McVean. It's obvious he enjoys his work and is on top of what's occurring in the red meat industry in both the near

and long term. There are also gains in the close association we have had with the Agriculture Division in Statistics Canada. I am most appreciative of the open sharing we have had with them over the past 15 years.

I hope Charles Caudill's remarks give you a greater appreciation for the value of institutional experience. We as unit leaders must stay on top of thrusts like dairy herd buyout, conservation reserve signup, list frame coverage, response rate trends, composite estimation, and publishing survey indications. We do less of the latter than any other Federal statistical agency and must improve statistical standards so more of it can be done.

Rich Allen's discussion on how the quarterly ag survey has developed, since a 1983 vision was outlined in "Framework for the Future", was enlightening. Let me just point out a few of the changes that have been made after study and testing--the July 1 reference date is now June 1, two crop years are not linked as planned earlier when July would have been the major reference survey, sample stratification is totally different, and cattle reference date of December 1 is now January 1. We owe three SSO's (Arizona, Illinois, and Tennessee) their staffs and Ralph Gann many thanks for their efforts in developing this survey methodology. Jack Aschwege gave us some good points on how to establish goals and monitor progress in getting the workload for QAS accomplished in the new timeframe. The proof of the pudding or the cream rose to the top in September and December when the national survey results were reviewed by the ASB. John Marten's presentation this morning shows that what we do requires no great PR to promote--just produce quality data for reports and it sells itself.

In that vein we have given the Statistical Standards Staff a very difficult task--and made it even harder by recently taking most of its staff away. Let me assure you they will be replaced. All of us have responsibilities in this area--enumerators, support staff, survey stats, commodity stats, systems analysts, branch chiefs, division directors, and deputies. We will have arrived at our standards goal when survey indications can be published. It's not likely we will ever get there but it's a good goal to strive for continually.

The Agency must also begin giving stronger emphasis to statistical standards in our cooperative State projects. A start would be to insist on probability sampling (with NOL coverage), followup of nonrespondents and computation of sampling errors. Let's not be bashful in asking for resources to do things right. Several SSO's have recently moved in this direction with major projects and had good success. Reports produced for such projects should always include a statement on survey and statistical methodology and include information about sampling errors.

Ron Bosecker gave an excellent update on list frame coverage and removal of inactive farm units during 1986-87. Some people feel we called this conference just to get the redbook updated!!! The Agency must continue its progress toward reaching a goal of 65 percent completeness. I believe we will reach 60 percent in 1987. To reach the goal, we need the following coverages:

- 90 percent of operators with \$100,000+ sales
- 85 percent of operators with \$40,000-\$99,999
- 75 percent of operators with \$10,000-\$39,999
- 50 percent of operators with \$2,500-\$9,999
- 40 percent of operators with \$1,000-\$2,499

Further progress in deleting the dead wood in our list will save resources--the 20 percent reduction in 1986-87 is a good start. Neither of these will be an easy task. We must keep looking for unique lists which have names that are likely to be farms--particularly special commodity farms.

I don't feel we have reached the optimum in organizing discussion groups at our conferences. Perhaps we should ask groups to develop policy or operational questions they would like for management to address and come back with 5 or 6 questions in priority order for division directors and deputies to answer.

I hope you appreciate the skills Bob Tortora and his staff bring to us for bridging the stream from research to applications. We have done some excellent work in prescreening NOC segments for farm operators--108,000 new farms have been found. Another 80,000 are needed in the next screening if we are to find all the farms we say exist. It's not important how we calculate the cost and whether it's \$2.00 as Bob says or \$5000 as Fred says--it's very important that we measure this incompleteness periodically. These data--paid for by the Census Ag Division--should be very valuable in establishing our 1987 official estimate of farm numbers.

Phil Zellers gave us some good background on ADP costs--NASS spends about 21 percent of its total budget on ADP--the largest of any USDA agency. This is still not enough but I'd like to have IBM's 900 percent increase for a couple years. ADP is not likely to reduce our current cost but it will allow us to cut future cost increases and staff requirements. The Data Management Division was the unit most impacted by the D.C. restructuring--it has more than a plate full of tasks to complete--and needs your best encouragement in getting its work done.

Confidentiality is a sensitive issue--we must look at it as a challenge rather than a problem. It must not be overmanaged and we all have a responsibility to understand it and keep it under tight control. The new legislation in the 1985 Food Security Act, the BLS list acquired, and future sharing all require that we close some of the small loopholes that have existed. The policies followed at Headquarters and in SSO's must be the same. There are strong and valuable cooperators at both levels. As we have closed out some of the nonquality (nonprobability) surveys for ERS and gone to the other surveys, we have changed established data sharing policies to meet requirements in the new legislation. We have to do the same for State cooperators--there can't be different requirements. In Headquarters and State cooperative work we need to emphasize the use of our total capability--the list frame, data collection and data handling. The Tennessee TVA example of flexibility in data collection, and the New York stance on not sharing micro energy records, provide a good base on which to build future policies of confidentiality.

The new NASS Headquarters structure has been in place for about 5 months and there are a few kinks still getting worked out. Some expected every detail to be resolved the day we shifted to the new organization. Nothing quite happens that way but we are gradually getting all the specifics resolved. Fred Vogel gave a good summary on how the SSO restructuring is proceeding. I know some of you still feel we might be on the road to Abilene with this thrust but that's not the case. From the first day that Paul Walsh and I sat down with 10 midwestern SIC's in August at Bismarck--right on through till this conference--there have been plenty questions asked, concerns expressed, and changes made. We need to take Eric Winslow's advice and shift our thinking to viewing this as a challenge and how we can make it work successfully. The 8 offices set for changes in

1987 are going to be equipped properly and given the resources and support needed to thoroughly test this concept. There will be more changes as experience is gained but the overall course direction is clearly established.

Staff development that Ray Hancock highlighted yesterday is one of the more important tasks NASS will face in the next few years. We each have responsibilities in staff development, evaluation, and counseling. I often remember my first experience with staff evaluation when supervisors refused to share their evaluations with any staff member because one member of the staff had an extremely low rating and they didn't want to reveal it to the individual. If each of you give your full support to this activity, it will greatly increase the likelihood that the type person you need when a vacancy occurs on your staff will be there to fill it. Some comments from discussion on this topic identified several unfortunate experiences where excellent and highly qualified women have been hired and later lost when they married and moved to another location with their spouse. We must continue to follow the law and always hire the best qualified applicants regardless of such later experience with resignation. I like the new titles being considered for SIC's and ASIC. If we eventually go to State Statistician and Deputy State Statistician, I hope at the time we make the change we drop from our vocabularies the gender titles "headman" and "second man."

In reviewing the evaluations, it's apparent that many of you felt we were not providing adequate emphasis to specific management, operating, and administrative issues. The focus in this meeting has been broader and taking a future look. Perhaps we should consider rotating the conference focus and cover the more specific at one conference and general direction at the next. It's particularly difficult to weave both together in one conference.

I've been talking longer than 20 minutes so some 80 percent of you are having those fantasies Eric Winslow described. The other 20 percent are probably thinking we are within a few minutes of concluding this conference and the only thing we have heard about Kibler's future plans was from the NASS players last night. Let me give you some statistics--today I've been your Administrator for 4,135 days. That's not a record since Harry Trelogan had more than 5,000 days. I'm not a Pete Rose so I don't intend to break his record. Let me save you some trouble--don't you math stats get out your terminals to analyze these statistics for a week--you system analysts shouldn't put them on Martin Marietta data base and you ag stats shouldn't go back and see what I said at St. Louis--I can save you lots of effort.

At St. Louis about 18 months ago Schell Bodenhamer gave me a memento as your leader. I just happened to have that red flashlight here today. Its original battery is still functioning although it's a bit dimmer. In fact, statistically if I used it conservatively it might last another 10, 12, or 14 months but that's not my nature. I'm going to continue to use it heartily and let it shine brightly--which says it will last another 49 days (7 weeks) till May 1, 1987.

Bob Beach is probably wiping his brow with relief now since he has worked extremely hard to make each of the last three conferences successful feeling each might be my last. I don't know where the new battery to fill this light will come from. NASS has plenty eligible and qualified individuals to provide this energy. The decision on your next leader will be made by Secretary Lyng and Acting Assistant Secretary Ewen Wilson. I'm glad Ewen Wilson wasn't here for our Thursday night banquet entertainment--he could have easily concluded it would be absolutely necessary to go outside for the next leader.

My desire and hope is that NASS will have a smooth leadership transition so full attention can continue to be given to our task of serving data users. I appreciate the personal and professional support you have and will give me during these 4,184 days as your leader. I've enjoyed working with you nearly every one of these--except perhaps the ESCS and ESS days. They have generally been mostly free of strain and the credit for that goes to the good jobs you have done day in and day out for more than 11 years.

I hope you can tell from my remarks that I prefer for changes in one's life like these be reflective and looked on as a joyful time rather than a sad time. I hope our conference formal sessions and the light times like the banquet made you--like it did me--happy to be a part of the NASS family. Let's keep all the experiences in the back of our minds as we call the 1987 conference "The Challenge of Change" to a close.