The Research Commitment to Rural Communities

Agricultural research is not just about figuring out how to grow more bushels of corn per acre or finding a way to stop ticks from biting cattle.

Agricultural research is also about improving the quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and all those who live in rural communities.

As Under Secretary for USDA's Research, Education, and Economics (REE) agencies, I see examples every day of the broad value of research—as well as all of what we do—to rural America. This mission area is as much about serving the people who live in rural communities as it is about ensuring that the nation enjoys safe, affordable, abundant, healthy food and fiber; promoting greater harmony between agriculture and the environment; and contributing to our agricultural system's competitiveness in the global marketplace. In fact, one of the five outcomes we desire, as articulated in the REE mission area's strategic planning process, is "enhanced economic opportunity for farmers, ranchers, and rural people and communities."

I recognize that rural development is about creating new economic opportunities in rural communities—new jobs, new businesses, and new careers. And I understand the significant role research is playing in achieving that goal. You will find examples in this Forum and on the pages that follow.

Maintaining strong, vital rural communities is essential to preserving our agricultural production base in this country. We need ways to ensure that rural communities offer a stable, attractive way of life so that people will want to live there and so that those born there will have the option to stay.

Recently, a special commitment was made to rural development when, just over a month ago, the President signed a Farm Bill that includes the Fund for Rural America—a $300 million (over 3 years) program designed to improve rural opportunities.

One-third of that money will go for direct rural development, such as providing housing and utilities in communities with populations of less than 50,000. Another third will go to the REE mission area to carry out research projects and education directed toward rural community development, including the business economy. And the last third may be spent on either component, at the Secretary's discretion, where opportunities for the most significant progress are identified.

This translates to at least $100 million in new funds for research, extension, and education over the next 3 years.

Agricultural research has already played—and will continue to play—many essential roles in rural development:

Improving and preserving the rural environment, especially water quality—

Many rural communities still depend on wells for their drinking water. This puts an even greater emphasis on the need for research to prevent groundwater contamination and safeguard drinking water.

Reducing runoff or leaching of agricultural chemicals—fertilizers, pesticides, and other inputs—is a major focus for ARS research. We are attacking the problem from many directions. Making chemical management more efficient, making waste management more effective, developing alternatives such as biological control agents, and designing more precise environmental monitoring systems are all approaches ARS is pursuing.

Developing new technologies that lead to business opportunities in rural communities—

New products and new technologies that come out of ARS research can stimulate the creation of business and jobs in rural areas.

For example, ARS has been working on basic research to determine optimum use of microwaves to replace pesticides for killing insects in stored grain. Now, a self-employed engineer is working to turn that research into a manufacturing plant in his hometown of Clinton, Wisconsin—population 1,850.

Other ARS research has led to the creation of similar types of new businesses and jobs in small towns.

Maintaining agricultural markets at home and abroad and lowering production costs—

Sometimes our research is about preserving segments of agricultural markets so that farmers and ranchers can continue to make a living. For instance, shipments of peaches and nectarines from three California counties to New Zealand were resumed this year for the first time since 1989, because ARS research verified that walnut husk fly presented a minimal risk of infestation. Peaches and nectarines are a $45 million U.S. market in Pacific Rim countries.

Other times, our research is concerned with finding new uses for agricultural commodities. The more new uses that USDA scientists find for crops like corn and wheat, the more opportunities growers will have for higher incomes. And there is nothing like higher income to encourage people to stay on the farm.

Of course, a big part of USDA's research is about the ongoing challenge of making it possible for farmers and ranchers to reduce costs and increase productivity so they can stay in business in these tough economic times.

It is the high quality of what our farmers and ranchers produce that creates such demand for U.S. agricultural products. Research is a big part of the reason for that quality.

Increasingly, the accomplishments of our scientists and the technology coming out of USDA's laboratories are being translated into jobs—and economic development—in rural areas across the country.

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