

Extension's Place in Public Policy

**Extension's role in public policy may differ
from what is appropriate
in the physical and biological sciences**

GEORGE B. ALCORN

WHAT PLACE does, or should, the Agricultural Extension Service have in the formulation of public policy? The argument of this paper is that the Agricultural Extension Service does have an accepted and important, but restricted, part in the formulation of public policy.

First, an attempt will be made to outline somewhat abstractly the process of policy formation and then to delineate the accepted roles of the Agricultural Extension Service and others. To begin with, a policy is a decided course of action—a decision has been made with respect to intended behavior. The important words are *decision* and *action*. And, of course, these can only apply to the present or the future. But before deciding on a policy, we go through an *ought* stage. What ought to be the policy? And, chronologically, before arriving at the ought stage we go through an *opinion* stage, or perhaps several stages of firmness of opinion before arriving at the ought stage.

Finally we might ask: from whence do opinions come? We hope opinions come from *facts* and that many of these are developed from research. We must concede, however, that many opinions are based really not on facts but upon beliefs, value judgments, or other notions, many of which have little or no contact with reality.

If we then lay out our abstraction of policy formulation, it runs in stages from *research* to *facts* to *opinions* to *ought* to *policy decision*. The question now becomes one of deciding what place *facts*, or should, the Agricultural Extension Service have in this

GEORGE B. ALCORN is Director, Agricultural Extension Service, University of California, Berkeley, California.

process. It may be helpful to divide our formulation of policy into three zones as follows:

<i>Zone One</i>	<i>Zone Two</i>	<i>Zone Three</i>
RESEARCH—FACTS	OPINION—OUGHT	POLICY DECISION

Except for the small number of issues submitted to the electorate, policy in the context of this formulation is decided by government. Government has almost the exclusive province of *Zone Three*—the decision of public policy. The universities and the Agricultural Extension Service have an accepted role in *Zone One* in research and the development of facts. *Zone Two*, the formulation of public opinion and the development of the ought stage, belongs to the public and its organizations. In our society we seem to resent either the universities (and the Agricultural Extension Service) or the government being very active in *Zone Two*.

To be sure, the zones do not have water-tight compartments between them—but in the field of public policy determination it is clear the temperature (political heat) and coefficients of friction rise rapidly as we proceed from research and facts to opinions and ought and finally to the decision. That being the case, the Agricultural Extension Service will operate more smoothly in *Zone One*. The farm organizations and the public have the province of *Zone Two* in which they perform a most important function of crystallizing public opinion and stating what ought to be done. And finally, government has the difficult task of making the decision. We conclude that all—the universities, the Agricultural Extension Service, the farmers and their organizations, and government—have important, though restricted, roles in the development of agricultural policy in our society today.

It should be pointed out, however, that the proper decision-making role of the Agricultural Extension Service is different in the physical and biological sciences. In these areas we proceed frequently without apprehension to the ought stage. Not so in the social sciences where public policy is determined—most often we must stop short of the ought or even the opinion stage. The reason for this important difference is that in the physical and biological sciences our systems of values are easily reduced to quantitative terms and are widely accepted. In the social sciences we lack comparable quantitative preciseness. This difference, coupled with great differences in systems of values and beliefs, precludes general acceptance of Agricultural Extension Service activity much beyond the fact stage.