

Extension: A Modern Day Pony Express?

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Abstract: The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 established the Cooperative Extension Service for the purpose of “diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture, home economics, and rural energy”. Since then, much has changed. Just over 92 million individuals lived in the United States in 1910, with 31% of the population employed as farmers. As of 2005, America’s population had increased to nearly 297 million people, with only 3% of the population earning a living on the farm. More telling, about 80% of America’s population now lives in a suburban/urban environment. Currently, the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service lists 11 areas of national emphasis, with focus areas ranging from agriculture to economics and commerce to technology and engineering. Furthermore, there are numerous programs offered at the state and county level under each of the 11 national emphasis areas. At a time when baseline funding to support the Extension system is threatened with extinction, we need to critically think about how to maintain Extension’s sustainability and relevance well into the 21st Century. For example, are Extension personnel spread too thin, trying to be all things to all people? Instead, might Extension be more effective shrinking the number of program areas offered and focusing limited resources. Should Extension be more fee-based than it currently is? Are we doing an adequate job of marketing Extension and the services and products offered? Companies like Ford vehicles and Kraft foods spend millions of dollars annually on market research and brand identification. As uncomfortable as it may be to critically examine ourselves, we need to ensure that Extension is as relevant and important today and into the future as it was at the time the Smith-Lever Act was passed.

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