

A Nation at Risk!

The breadth of research and extension/outreach and educational programs provided by Colleges of Agriculture, Experiment Stations and Cooperative Extension Units at our nation's land grant institutions – historic institutions built on the idea of service to society – extends outward to meet critical needs and issues well beyond those of traditional production agriculture. Today this system is at risk of failure. We truly are a ***Nation at Risk***, but many in leadership positions see neither the issues, nor the risk.

What is at risk – our food supply, global competitiveness, food production, food safety, health of our rural communities and the health, diet and nutrition of our Nation's citizens. Over the past decades we have witnessed an erosion of our scientific base, and will see an even larger erosion as nearly 20% of our agricultural scientists are scheduled to retire in the next 5-7 years. With the continuing decline in funding from state and federal resources, this can only lead to further shrinkage of the faculty required to address critical issues. While our scientists compete for funding from the NSF, NIH and the USDA – NRI Competitive Grants portfolios, these funds will not keep the infrastructure in place that allow those scientists and extension educators with applied, adaptive programs of taking basic findings and applying them in ways that will directly impact farmers, ranchers, homeowners and other stakeholders and thus adding to economic development and community viability. Our scientists will continue to compete for NSF, NIH and USDA-NRI funds to do the basic research and build the knowledge base for future generations of scientists, but at the same time the formula fund base needs to grow to allow this basic knowledge to be brought to bear on applied, every day problems, and thus keep the U.S. agricultural system globally competitive.

It is imperative that we maintain our ability to remain broadly focused. The problems that we can anticipate facing in the future require that we maintain our intellectual core, and even grow it, as the areas of science needing the attention of agricultural researcher's is ever increasing in complexity. A case in point is the recently noted ability of the Nation's scientists at our land grant universities to be responsive to identifying and developing strategies to isolate and understand the impacts of the newly introduced Soybean Rust, which has the potential to destroy an important component part of the agricultural economy of the U.S.

It is this maintenance research (that many find mundane and lacking sex appeal!) that keeps our Nation's agricultural sector in a leading, globally competitive position. Given that the states are largely without the resources to increase budgets, and tuition increases at our universities can not and should not be used for these purposes, it is clear that there is a well defined federal need.

What is required?

1. Congressional Education: It is critical that we provide the rationale for decision and policy makers, and congressional aides to better understand the need for

formula funds. Few realize how these funds are utilized in providing the infrastructure that allows research to continue uninterrupted and over many years of trials. Simply put, herds, flocks, orchards, field trials, and other large scale supporting facilities needed to provide agricultural scientists with the tools to do their work will be lost. Written materials need to be developed that specifically identify the impacts from these formula fund expenditures, and the return on these investments.

We should begin a process to define a new term to describe our federal funding. Recently, discussions regarding the Estate Tax were redefined around the term “Death” Tax. As a result, significant changes were made in this taxation program.

Formula funding is actually “Foundation Funding” or “Foundation Framework Funding” – it funds the basic foundational research and extension framework that our system of science is built upon. It is our FOUNDATION!

Maintaining the expanding base of our foundational framework of science has been shown to support multi-faceted discover and education across disciplines and technologies. When we take resources from the foundation, the whole structure is impacted negatively.

2. A national effort to support increases in the formula funds (Smith-Lever, Evans Allen, Hatch, and McIntire Stennis) is required. The system needs to aggressively seek an increase of at least \$25M in new formula funds in the next budget cycle with the increases going to the states to be targeted toward integrated research and extension programs. Two high priority programs come to mind – Water, and Health, Diet and Nutrition. State AES and CES directors would distribute any new funding with a documented locally administered competitive grants program.
3. Any effort to increase formula funds will require the building of new coalitions. It is time that the BRT seek to build stronger coalitions and relationships with National CFAR, Co-Farm and the national commodity organizations to increase formula funds.
4. Any effort to seek an increase in federal formula funds will require that we identify a true land-grant champion in the Congress, who truly understands the need and complexity of the issues and is willing to speak out.
5. Land Grant universities should aggressively move toward university wide extension / outreach efforts to utilize the full benefits of the university toward addressing local and community issues. Too often the outreach efforts of CES are viewed too narrowly by the university community, and thus there is a narrowing of the view and perspective of the LGU.

We are at the cross-roads! Are we going to increase formula funds in order to allow our system of State Agricultural Experiment Stations to continue to function, or are we going

to continue to decrease these funds in terms of real dollars, and shrink our ability to do the real time, anticipatory research and outreach necessary to keep our nation globally competitive? We think that the time is right to aggressively seek to increase the federal formula funds and that the alternatives of not doing so place our Nation's food supply, safety, and production at risk? Are we willing to accept this risk or do we move forward with a unified plan of action?

Prepared by T. A. Fretz, February 2005