The Agricultural Extension System and the "New American Farmer"
The Opportunities Have Never Been Greater[1]

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"The Cooperative Extension System in this country is at a crossroads. This is true of Extension programming in general, and is particularly true for agriculture-related programs. The actions (or inactions) of today will determine Extension's future, but one thing is certain—the days ahead definitely will not consist of "business as usual." The clock is running; there simply is not much time to decide what changes are needed, and then to implement those changes. If Extension can change successfully, its future will be extremely bright. The needs for informal educational programs will be greater in the future than they have ever been in the past."

This statement is a direct quote from, *Vision for the Future: A Strategic Plan for Agriculture*, the official report of a national task force assembled by USDA to develop a roadmap for the future of agricultural extension programs. It was published in October, *1994*.i I was a member of that national task force and I believe today as I did then that Extension was at an important crossroads. Unfortunately Extension administration decided to continue down the same road it had been on for a while – pretty much "business as usual."

Certainly, extension specific programming strategies and communications technologies have changed dramatically over the past 14 years. However, the basic extension programming model "technology transfer" of has remained pretty much the same. When Extension administrators talk about achieving *measurable outcomes*, they are talking about adoption of technology, not about education or empowerment of people. I want to make it clear that I'm referring to the Agricultural Extension system, not specific agricultural agents. Many individual extension agents seized the opportunities of the late '90s and today their work is highly respected and valued among their constituents. However, the Extension organization today is still viewed by many as being "held hostage" by powerful special-interest groups. An entrenched Extension bureaucracy has limited the ability of individual extension agents to address the educational needs of the people who most need their help.

Extension missed the opportunity for a fundamental change in the mid-'90s. Fortunately, however, the clock has not yet run out. Furthermore, both the opportunities for change and the risks of inaction are even greater today than in 1994. My purpose here is not to rehash the mistakes of the past but instead to focus on the opportunities for the future. It's still true that "the need for informal educational programs will be greater in the future than they have ever been in the past." The opportunities have never been greater – if the people within the Extension System can find the courage to change themselves and then to change their organization.

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The opportunities for agricultural extension are epitomized by the emergence of a new kind of American farmer. These new farmers may be labeled as organic, biodynamic, holistic, alternative, ecological, practical, innovative, or just family farmers, but they all fit under the conceptual umbrella of sustainable agriculture. Sustainable agriculture is not simply a specific set of farming methods, practices, or enterprises; it is a specific philosophy of farming. The purpose of sustainable agriculture is permanence – to meet the food and fiber needs of people in the future, indefinitely. Sustainable farms must sufficient productivity to meet the needs of the present but must also make sufficient investments in natural and human resources to ensure that future generations can meet their needs as well.

All agricultural productivity and economic value comes from either land or people – from nature or society. If the productivity of nature and society are depleted, there will be no source of productivity or profitability. Unfortunately, the economy provides strong incentives for investments that benefit individuals but provides no incentives for investments that benefit society in general or those of future generations. All economic value is individualistic; it accrues only to individuals, not societies. Thus, economic value must at least be expected to accrue during the lifetime of the individual decision maker. Interest rates are a reflection of the economic value of time. At an interest rate of seven-percent, for example, a dollar that we have to wait ten years to get is worth only fifty-cents today. That's why corporations operate with five-to-seven year planning horizons. Anything beyond that has very little economic value.

Questions concerning the sustainability of agriculture continue to grow because more people are coming to understand that an agriculture driven solely by the economic bottom line is not sustainable. The future of humanity depends on farmers being willing and able to balance their legitimate individual economic needs with their social and ethical responsibilities for the well-being of others, both of current and future generations. Such restraint of narrow self-interests isn't some radical, new-age way of thinking; it's as old as the history of human civilization. People have always understood that we humans are not purely self-seeking physical beings; we are social and spiritual beings as well. We need the sense of belonging that comes from caring for others. We need the sense of ethical and moral rightness that comes from caring for the earth. The ancient philosophers understood that happiness requires a sense of rightness in our relationships with each other and with the earth. Sustainable agriculture only requires a return to our historical sense of human happiness.

The sustainable agriculture movement was still in its infancy in the mid-1990s. The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program had been established in 1988 but Cooperative Extension did not receive specific SARE funding until the early ‘90s. Extension administrators were not particularly comfortable with the SARE program because funds were allocated by regional SARE councils rather than at the discretion of State Extension Directors. Their reluctance to embrace the “Sustaining Our Future” strategic plan in 1994 was understandable, but nonetheless, unfortunate. Many thought sustainable agriculture was a passing fad, but it wasn't. It was the beginning of a fundamental transformation in American agriculture.

Sustainable farmers today are still a distinct minority in American agriculture – at least in terms of value of agricultural production. Most sustainable farmers would be classified as small

to mid-sized. Thus, sustainable farms make up a far larger share of farm numbers than their share of total value of farm production. However, they are growing rapidly both in numbers and in value of production. The organic food market, for example, grew at a rate of more than 20-percent per year during the 1990s and well into the early 2000s. Organic food sales now total almost $20-billion – about 4-percent of the total U.S. food market. Other "natural foods" – free range, local, grass-fed, hormone-, antibiotic-, GM-free – add at least 50-percent to the organic total. Each year, at least six "sustainable agriculture" conferences in the U.S. and Canada draw 1,500 to 2,500 people, the vast majority of those attending being farmers. Conferences drawing more than 500 farmers are becoming almost commonplace and virtually every state has an organic or sustainable agriculture organization, most hosting conferences that draw 100-200 farmers. The sustainable agriculture movement is alive and well, at least at the grassroots, and is gaining momentum with each passing year.

Agricultural Extension has a tremendous opportunity to play an important role in the sustainable agriculture movement. However, meeting the information and educational needs of sustainable farmers will require a very different model of extension programming. The traditional technology transfer model, while still relevant, is simply not adequate to meet the needs of the new American farmer. There are no rules of thumb, formulas, or "best management practices" for sustainable farming. Sustainable farms must function in harmony with the specific natural ecosystems and communities in which they are located and thus are inherently site-specific. Sustainable farmers also have unique abilities, aspirations, and social and ethical values and thus are individualistic. Every sustainable farm will be different, but the new sustainable farmers do share some common core values.

First, sustainable farmers value working with nature rather than trying to control or conquer nature. They try to fit their farms and farming methods to their land and climate rather than trying to redirect, restrict, or bend nature to fit the way they might prefer to farm. Their farms tend to be more diversified than are conventional farms, because nature is diverse. Diversity may mean varieties of crop and animal enterprises, crop rotations and cover crops, or managed grazing systems with diverse species of forages or livestock. By managing diversity, sustainable farmers are able to reduce their dependence on synthetic pesticides, commercial fertilizers, and other costly inputs that squeeze farm profits and threaten the environment on many conventional farms. Their farms are more economically viable, as well as more ecologically sound because they function in harmony with nature.

Second, sustainable farmers value relationships. Most either market their products directly to customers at venues such as farmers markets or through cooperative organizations that connect them with their customers. They realize their customers value food products differently because they have different needs and different preferences. They market to people who care where their food comes from and how it is produced – locally grown, organic, natural, humanely raised, hormone and antibiotic free, without genetic engineering – and they receive premium prices by producing foods that are valued by their customers. They are not looking for opportunities to make quick profits; they respect their customers as people and often create long-term relationships. Sustainable farmers challenge the stereotypical image of farmers as being fiercely independent. They form partnerships and cooperatives with other farmers to buy equipment, to process and market their products, to do things together that they can't do as well alone. They

freely share information and refuse to exploit each other for short run gain. They buy locally and market locally in the communities where they live. They help bring people together in positive, productive, personal relationships and they receive economic and social value in return.

Third, sustainable farmers are "quality of life" farmers. To them, the farm is a good place to live – a healthy environment, a good place to raise a family, and a good way to be a part of a caring community. Many sustainable farms create quality of life benefits worth tens of thousands of dollars, in addition to any reported net farm income. Their farming operations reflect the things they like to do, the things they believe in, and the things they have a passion for, as much as the things that yield profits. Sustainable farmers also find a spiritual sense of purpose and meaning through farming; many feel they were *meant* to be farmers. They respect their neighbors, their customers, the land, and animals not just because it's profitable, but because it's the ethical and moral thing to do. However, their products are often better and their costs are less because by following their passion they end up doing what they do best. They earn an acceptable income, but more important, they have a higher quality of life because they are living a life they love.

Finally, sustainable farmers are thinking farmers. They must understand nature, in order to work in harmony with nature, and must understand people in order to build relationships with their customers, neighbors, and other farmers. Sustainable farming requires an ability to translate observation into information, information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom. Sustainable farming is the mind work of the information age, not the hard work of agrarian era. Certainly, sustainable farming involves some hard work, but its success depends far more on thinking than on working. Most important, because of their site-specific, individualistic uniqueness, the new American farmers must think for themselves. Cooperative Extension workers have the opportunity today to become a primary source of intellectual empowerment for the new American farmers.

Empowerment is one of those controversial words that some people embrace and others reject – like sustainability. Those who embrace it believe it is fundamental and important while those who reject it see it as confusing or threatening. "Empowerment," in today's world, "refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities."ii The 1994 strategic plan for extension proposed a "Collaborative Networking Model" for Extension programming in response to the new information and educational needs of sustainable agriculture. In essence, it was designed to strengthen the capacities of individuals and communities to solve their problems and realize their opportunities by thinking for themselves – the empowerment of people with information and knowledge.

I believe today as I believed then that Extension must return to its historical, philosophical roots if it is to remain relevant in a future that must focus increasingly on issues of sustainability. While we cannot afford to dwell on our past mistakes, neither can we afford to ignore our past mistakes as we look to the future. The decision "to stay the course" in the mid-'90s wasn't the first unfortunate choice Agricultural Extension has made. Organizations must change their programs and procedures to accommodate the ever changing ecological, social, and economic environment. But, an organization that abandons its philosophical roots soon forgets its

fundamental purpose for being. Lacking a clear sense of purpose, perpetuation of the organization becomes its highest priority. It becomes captivated by the ever-fickle economic or political winds of change, rationalizing any action that promises survival and growth.

The legitimate public purpose of the Cooperative Extension Service has not changed. Extension was established by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 "to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same." So the diffusion and application of useful information was a part of the original Extension *mission*. However, the Act also states that the work of cooperative agricultural extension "shall consist of the giving of instruction and practical demonstrations in agriculture and home economics to persons not attending or resident in said colleges in the several communities." Thus, the *work* of Agricultural Extension was defined as education – the generation of knowledge. The diffusion of useful information, which we now refer to as technology transfer, was but a means to the greater end of education – the empowerment of people with the knowledge to use information.

Extension was established as a compliment to Land Grant Universities and Agricultural Experiment Stations that had been established earlier, in the late 1800s. Extension was to "take the university to the people." The numbers of extension agents were expanded significantly during World War I, to enhance the ability of American farmers to provide food for the Allied forces in Europe. Extension programs in agriculture, home economics, and 4-H were again expanded during the 1920s, to deal with the impacts of the post-war transition on farming communities. The 1930s brought the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl years. The government relied heavily on Cooperative Extension to help meet the needs of people during these most troubling of times in rural America.

Prior to the 1930s, agricultural extension workers had focused their work on teaching individual farming practices, following the lead of university researchers who focused on specific problems and university teachers who taught specific subjects. The task of tying the various practices together in order to develop coherent farming operations was left largely to the farmer. Many innovative, caring county agents, understood that their work wasn't simply to diffuse information or technology, but instead to empower farmers to use information and technologies to improve their overall quality of life.

Rural Americans had problems and the county agents were there, in their communities, to help solve their problems. Rural Americans also had opportunities and the county agents were there to help them realize their opportunities. When county agents encouraged farmers to try hybrid seed corn, farmers responded.iii When increased tractor power, commercial fertilizers, and synthetic pesticides sparked a technological revolution in American agriculture, county extension agents were on the front lines. But the county agents of '30s and '40s were far more than information providers or technology promoters.

By the late 1930s, the Missouri Extension Service had developed a program it called "Balanced Farming." The Balanced Farming program helped farmers balance opportunities for greater farm income with the need to conserve and protect the soil and water, and their personal responsibilities to their families and their communities. It balanced the economic, ecological, and

social responsibilities of farming. Similar programs were being carried out by extension agents in other states. By1949, a review of the Extension Service concluded, "The central task of extension is to help rural families help themselves by applying science, whether physical or social, to the daily routines of farming, homemaking, and family and community living,"iv.

In my opinion, the "high-water mark" for Cooperative Extension was in the 1950s, which coincided with the high-water mark for rural America. In 1954, a special Congressional appropriation funded the USDA Farm and Home Development program, which was patterned after the Missouri Balanced Farming program. Under this new mandate, the farm and home were to be viewed as a single system, and Agricultural Extension accepted the legitimacy of farming as both a business and a lifestyle. "Production options, marketing, community, lifestyle, and plans for the farm children's development were all part of the educational experience."v

Unfortunately, Cooperative Extension eventually became enamored with the post-WWII mechanical and chemical technologies. County agents could "work magic" for farmers who were willing to apply the prescribed quantities of N, P, K, and Ca in the form of commercial fertilizers. It was no longer necessary to manage crops and livestock as a single system to sustain the *natural* productivity of the soil. Insects and weeds no longer had to be managed through crop selection and rotations or soil fertility; they could be eradicated with the new pesticides. Animal *husbandry* became animal *science*, as new technologies bought similar advancements in production of meat, milk, and eggs. The county agent was on longer the farmer's "guide on the side" who could help farmers learn how to live more fulfilling lives. The county agent had become the "sage on the stage" that could tell farmers how to produce more and make more money.

This new approach to extension work fit in well with a basic redirection of U.S. agricultural policy. The only legitimate justification for government involvement in agriculture is to ensure national food security. The early mandate for Extension was to ensure that enough families were willing and able to continue farming to provide for the food and fiber needs of the nation. However, with the new mechanical and chemical technologies, it soon became apparent that far fewer farmers would be able to produce far more food and fiber than had ever been thought possible. By the mid-1960s, priorities for Agricultural Extension had shifted from empowering farm families to take good care of the land to making it possible for fewer farmers to produce more on less land. According to a 1966 Guide to Extension Training, "Extension personnel have the task of bringing scientific knowledge to farm families in the farms and homes. The object of the task is to improve the efficiency of agriculture."vi The objective of agricultural extension work had been subtly shifted from the empowerment of *farmers* to the efficiency of *agriculture*.

New technologies brought Extension to a crossroads in the early 1960s. Lacking a clear commitment to its fundamental purpose and core values, it chose the wrong path. It mistook the "means" – technology transfer -- for the "end" or purpose – education. By the time I began my extension career in 1970, there were already rumors among researchers and university administrators that Cooperative Extension was obsolete and probably wasn't worth reviving. The agricultural economy boomed during the 1970s, fueled by U.S. exports of farm commodities. Farming became a dynamic and profitable business and modern farmers were rapidly becoming astute businessmen. Many had been educated in the same universities as their extension agents and didn't need a county agent to tell them how to run their farm businesses.

Suppliers of farm equipment, fertilizer, pesticide, and animal feeds were more than willing to provide farmers with the latest, cutting-edge technological information. In fact, their information was often more up-to-date and complete than the information available to extension agents. Some agribusinesses hired their own teams of "field agents" who were free to *sell* as well as inform. The Extension worker's only advantage soon became that he or she wasn't *selling* anything. However, many Extension specialists felt compelled to develop a specific clientele group in order to remain competitive with their corporate counterparts. Many field-based extension agents had been trained as specialists by this time, so their clientele naturally tended to be owners of large, specialized farming operators. Conveniently for Extension, these large farm operators tended to have lot of economic and political influence with the County Commissioners, which Extension depended on for local funding. Thus, many agriculture agents were soon "held-hostage" by local special-interest groups.

Specialization left the Cooperative Extension Service poorly equipped to deal with the farm financial crisis of the 1980s. During the early '80s, U.S. agricultural exports plummeted, leaving farmers with depressed prices, surplus production capacity, and large debts financed at high interest rates. Information concerning new technologies for increasing production was no longer of much value to anyone. Even we economists were ill prepared to deal with the crisis. Better financial management and marketing strategies couldn't reduce interest rates or increase prices to levels even approaching profitable for most farmers. Few if any of Extension's agriculturalists were equipped help farm families cope with the economic, social, and emotional crisis of the times. The physical, economic, and social problems of farm families in the 1980s were inseparable – holistic – and we were trained as specialists.

During the 1980s, at least some of us in Extension decided that the specialized, technology transfer model of extension was not working. Even more important, the specialized, industrial model of agriculture was not working either. As agriculture became more specialized, it became more standardized, routinized, and mechanized. Specialized technologies reduced production costs and allowed each farmer to produce more. However, their expansion in production and resulting falling prices forced other farmers to expand their operations, just to survive. As farms grew larger, some farmers had to fail so that others could buy their land and have a chance to survive another round on the technology treadmill. In addition, when family farms failed, farming communities failed. It takes people, not just production, to support local businesses, schools, churches, clinics, and social events that make a viable rural community. An agriculture increasingly driven by the economic bottom line was destroying family farms and rural communities.

Eventually, I began to understand negative ecological consequences of industrial agriculture as well. I already knew farming "fencerow-to-fencerow" wasn't sustainable because soil erosion was rapidly returning to levels of the dust bowl days. I soon discovered that concerns about the pollution of streams with fertilizers, pesticides, and wastes from confinement animal feeding operations weren't just the ranting of a bunch of "hippies" or "tree-huggers," as I had been told. These things were threatening the long run sustainability of agriculture – its ability to meet the food and fiber needs of people in the present without compromising opportunities of people in the future. The early advocates of sustainable agriculture weren't trying to degrade or demean

agriculture; we were simply trying to help farmers create an economically viable, socially responsible, ecologically sound, sustainable agriculture.

I decided that I needed to change, regardless of whether Cooperative Extension was willing to change. I left my position of Head of Extension Agricultural Economic at the University of Georgia and returned to the University of Missouri to pursue a new career in sustainable agriculture. That's when I first heard of the Balanced Farming program. Almost immediately, I understood that sustainable agriculture was not really anything new to Extension. Balanced farming was sustainable farming. It was about caring for the land and caring about communities, so that farms could help sustain a desirable quality of life for farm families, rural residents, and society. Others in the Extension organization all across the country responded similarly to the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, sowing the seeds for the emergence of sustainable agriculture extension programs of the 1990s.

This was the backdrop for the "Vision for the Future" Agriculture Extension strategic plan of 1994. In fact, the task force had named the report, "Sustaining Our Future" – extension administration changed it. This plan was not developed by a bunch of radical environmentalists or social reformers. The task force was co-chaired by Bud Webb, a longtime Extension Director from South Carolina. Billy Caldwell, who was later Extension Director in North Carolina, was also a prominent member. State specialists Curtis Absher, Bonnie Braun, and Donald Mc Feeters went to have distinguished careers in Extension. Larry Yee recently retired from his County Extension Director position in California and Dale Mutch has out a distinguished extension IMP program in Michigan. We had all once advocated a model of agriculture and of extension programming that we no longer believed to be sustainable. We wanted to help create a new vision of a sustainable agriculture and a sustainable Cooperative Extension program to support it.

The stated goal of the report was "To sustain a globally competitive, environmentally compatible, and socially acceptable agriculture." The first sub-goal related to specific outcomes and strategies for sustainable farms, communities, and society. A second sub-goal related to the organizational and programming changes needed for Extension to carry out the plan. The words were different than those that might have been written in the 1930s or 1940s and new communications technologies had created a host of new educational possibilities. However, in a very real sense, our vision for the future would require Extension to return to its philosophical roots and core values. Extension would have to move beyond the *means* of technology transfer and embrace the larger *end* of education – to the empowerment of people.

The highest *organizational* priority in the plan was the establishment of a "collaborative networking model for Extension programming." In the traditional technology transfer model of programming, information is generated by research and translated into usable form and disseminated to potential users by extension workers. However, information flows in both directions, as extension workers identify and communicate the research needs of constituents back to research scientists.

The report concluded that the traditional technology transfer model "is relevant, efficient, and appropriate where, (1) common problems have common solutions for significant segments of Extension's constituency, (2) when problems are static or persistent over time, and (3) when

information needed to address problems is not available from other sources." However, in many situations (including those related to sustainable agriculture), problems (1) are site-specific and individualistic, (2) are dynamic and must be addressed quickly, and (3) can be addressed using information from sources other than land-grant research. To accommodate such cases a much more comprehensive and dynamic programming model is needed.

The networking model incorporates the traditional technology transfer model, to be used when appropriate. However, the networking model "(1) uses credible information from all available sources, (2) encourages constituents to bypass extension workers and go directly to information sources, when information is available in usable form, (3) encourages constituents to form networks with other constituents to exchange information and conduct their own research when appropriate." In the networking model, information flows in all directions at all times – there are no information "gatekeepers." In somewhat more sophisticated words, "The essence of agricultural extension is to facilitate interplay and nurture synergies within a total information system involving agricultural research, agricultural education and a vast complex of information-[providers]."vii

The most important programming aspect of the networking model is that it shifts programming emphasis to the constituents – their problems and opportunities – and away from specific technologies. The primary role of the extension worker is to facilitate learning rather than transfer technology. Dissemination of information becomes a means toward the greater end of education. Constituents are encouraged to solve their own problems, seize their own opportunities, meet their own needs, and shape their own destinies. The constituent becomes the centerpiece of the model, reaching out to other constituents, extension workers, and information providers of all types. Technological advances since 1994, the Internet in particular, make this type of information networking far more feasible today than it was at the time of the report.

The problems and opportunities confronting the new American farmer today are site-specific, individualistic, and dynamic. The vast majority of the most credible, relevant, and useful information related to sustainable agriculture is not being generated by land-grant universities but by nonprofit organizations and by farmers themselves. Virtually all of this information is readily accessible to farmers through the Internet. Farmers may need guidance in finding and interpreting credible information, but they don't need an information "gatekeeper." Extension agents today have an opportunity to return to the status of the county agent in "Golden Years" of Cooperative Extension. They can once again "help rural families help themselves by applying science, whether physical or social, to the daily routines of farming, homemaking, and family and community living." Extension work can return to empowering people to make their own decisions.

Agricultural agents need not sacrifice their areas of specialization to help farmers acquire the broader knowledge needed to integrate the ecological, economic, and social aspects of sustainable faming. Nor do they need to become generalists to help sustainable farmers acquire useful information from a wide range of specialties or disciplines. They need only understand enough about the basics principles of sustainability and the core concepts of other specialties to know what types of information might be relevant to particular issues and where to find it. I am a better economist today that I ever was when I focused time and energy on the narrow

disciplinary issues of economics. I suspect other specialists would benefit from broadening of their intellectual perspectives as well.

Two additional organizational strategies in the "Sustaining our Future" report were given high priority. Both are critical to extension work in sustainable agriculture. The first was to develop a "code of ethics for Cooperative Extension." The primary purpose of this proposal was to "eliminate the risk of being 'held-hostage' by special-interest groups." The role of Extension is "to help agriculture producers, agribusiness, communities, and society make informed decisions." While Extension might be expected to give priority to research-based information from land-grand universities, it is obligated to make any and all credible information available to decision makers under this mandate. The code of ethics would make clear that the primary responsibility of Extension workers is to enhance the well-being of their constituents – of people in general – not to perpetuation of the Extension System by catering to the whims of economically or politically powerful special-interest groups.

Paraphrasing Mark Twain, "Extension workers should be loyal to the people always, but loyal to the Extension System when it deserves it." Agricultural extension workers are going to have to free themselves from the special-interest groups that are currently holding the extension organization hostage – specifically corporate agriculture, major commodity groups, and politically powerful farm organizations – if they are to realize the tremendous opportunities represented by the new American farmer. An Extension "code of ethics" should make clear the right and responsibility of extension workers to put the long run sustainability of agriculture and of humanity ahead of the demands of any individual or organization.

Finally, "Sustaining our Future" proposed the development of a "bill of rights" for Extension constituents. The mission of Extension is "to improve the decision making ability of constituents and help them become independent learners." In other words, the intent is not to turn constituents into "clients," by creating continuing dependencies. Perhaps most important, a constituent "bill of rights" should make clear that everyone has an equal right to the services of Extension. Extension is a public service organization, not a private business. If one person goes into a private business with $100 and another goes in with $10, the person with $100 has a right to buy ten times as much as the other. If the same two people go into a voting booth, they each get only one vote – no matter how much money they have. Extension is a function of government, and in a democracy, everyone is entitled to an equal right to government services and an equal voice in determining what services shall be provided. If the public decides to quit paying for specific services through taxes, they need to understand that the services will not be available. But as long as the services are available, they must be equally available to all.

Equal opportunity for all is an absolute essential if Extension is to realize the tremendous opportunities of sustainable agriculture. The vast majority of total value of agricultural production is accounted for by a very small percentage of total farming operations – the large specialized producers of basic agricultural commodities. Increasingly, these operations are managed solely for the economic bottom line, either under comprehensive corporate contracts or as family corporate businesses. Virtually all of the major new technologies being developed in land-grant universities these days are designed specifically to meet the needs of these corporate "clients." The focus of agricultural research today is economic development, not sustainability.

The vast majority of all farmers operate small to mid-size farms. The prospects for these farmers competing with the large operations in terms of economic efficiency are virtually nonexistent. Thus, the best hope for success of the vast majority of Agricultural Extension's legitimate constituents is not industrial agriculture but sustainable agriculture. A number of respected and credible retail food market studies place the current potential market for organic, natural, local and other sustainably produced foods at about *one-third* of the total food market, and the share is growing rapidly. Current production of sustainably produced foods is meeting less than *one-fifth* of the current potential market. All of the small and mid-sized farms together would not be able supply the market that exists today. Most important, the small to mid-sized farms have a distinct advantage over the large commodity producers in meeting the needs of the organic, natural, local, sustainable food market. It's far easier for smaller farms to be site-specific, individualistic, and dynamic. The future opportunities for these farms are boundless, and these farmers have every right to expect Agriculture Extension to help them realize those opportunities.

All many of these farmers are lacking today is the information, knowledge, and self-confidence needed to step off of the technology treadmill – to make their own decisions, solve their problems, realize their opportunities, and to take control of their own destinies. As more new American farmers become empowered, as they become stronger economically, socially, politically, and spiritually, their knowledge will evolve into wisdom. And most important, American agriculture will become more sustainable. All the new American farmer needs from Extension is "a guide on the side" – a *county agent*. The opportunities for Agricultural Extension workers have never been greater, if they can find the courage to seize them, first by changing their own programs and by changing the Extension organization.

End Notes:

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i Note: I was unable to find a copy of "Vision for the Future" on the Internet. All quotations were taken from my one remaining personal copy (John Ikerd).

ii "Empowerment," The Free Dictionary, http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/empowerment .

iii USDA, "ARS Time Line," http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/timeline/corn.htm

iv Brunner, E. and Hsin Pao Yang, E. (1949) *Rural America and the Extension Service*, Columbia University.

v Cornell Cooperative Extension: “A History of Commitment to the People of New York,” http://www.cce.cornell.edu/document/pdf/CCEHistory.pdf

vi Bradfield, D.J. (1966) *Guide to Extension Training* (1st Edition), U.S. Foreign Agricultural Organization.

vii Neuchatel Group,(1999) *Common Framework on Agricultural Extension; Note:* The Neuchatel Group is an informal co-operation between the statistical offices of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland to clarify some basic concepts and to arrive at a common terminology for classifications.