

A thousand columns and still counting: A look over our shoulders

When we began writing this column nearly 20 years ago, the idea that we would author 1,000 columns seemed incomprehensible. After all we were in our mid-50s and who knew what our health would be in our 70s. But our health remained good and today we are writing our 1,000th column.

In 2000, Daryll had begun to write, print, and distribute “Policy Matters,” a publication that he sent to Congressional members and staff as well as other ag economists and members of farm organizations. The process of producing and mailing each issue was tedious and expensive.

Harwood had just arrived at the Agricultural Policy Analysis Center after 30 years as a parish pastor and 10 years as the publisher and editor of a country weekly newspaper. He said weekly newspaper editors needed a good quality column that analyzed rural and agricultural policy and suggested that Daryll write a shorter weekly version of “Policy Matters” that would provide the kind of information that farmers need and can use.

But it wasn’t until Daryll received a letter from Barbara Ross, Rural Life Director of the Diocese of Jefferson City, that we followed through on the idea. Barbara wrote that she was recommending Daryll to the publisher of the MidAmerica Farmer/Grower to succeed Harold Breimyer who wrote more than 2,000 agricultural policy columns—a record we probably will not match. Daryll soon received a letter from the publisher and our first column was written for the first week in July 2000.

If we were to take the time and energy to write the column, Daryll wanted to make sure that it had maximum exposure. To do that we established the www.agpolicy.org website where each column is posted. In addition, we send a column link to the people and publications who are on our listserv.

Over the years, other farm publications have picked up our column, printing it in their paper every week. Others use selected columns in their newsletters, forward links for our column to members of their listservs, or publish selected columns on their website. In a given year our columns are accessed on our website more than 500,000 times by people in more than 50 countries around the world.

We have never asserted a copyright on the column because when we were working for a Land Grant University we saw the dissemination of our policy research as a part of our responsibilities as researchers and faculty members. In our retirement, we are still inspired by the Land Grant mission. The column results in invitations to speak to farm groups and policy makers around the world.

In the beginning, we had the benefit of the material Daryll had written for “Policy Matters,” but after 6 weeks he said to Harwood, “How are we going to find enough material to write a column every week?” It turns out that it isn’t as hard as we feared. In fact, we have the opposite problem, there are more ag, food, and rural issues that we can write about than we have columns in a year.

At first, Daryll was listed as the author with assistance from Harwood. Later Harwood was added as the second author and with Daryll’s retirement, Harwood became the lead author. Though the listing of the authorship has changed over the years, two things have remained the same: the process and the perspective.

The process: Almost every conversation we have is centered on current agricultural issues. In these discussions we work through the issues seeking to identify what we can say that will add to the information that farmers and consumers need in responding to the issues they face. Often, we do this for multiple issues in a given week. Out of that mix, we then focus on writing the column.

Using the ideas generated in our discussions, Harwood writes the first draft of the column and emails it to Daryll, who reads the column, making changes to the draft where necessary. He then sends the edited column back to Harwood. Some of the time it takes only a single round to get the column ready for publication, other times we bat it back and forth numerous times before we are comfortable sending it out.

The perspective: Our policy perspective is built on the insights of Henry Agard Wallace, Editor of "Wallace's Farmer" and Secretary of Agriculture, 1933-1940, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as well as the policy perspective of the New Deal.

Underlying everything we write is the recognition that food is different from other products; it is a necessity for life. Without access to adequate food people suffer from undernutrition and die. That means if we have a choice between policies that result in the production of too much food or too little, we will vote for policies of abundance every time and then figure out how to manage the excess capacity and resulting production.

In conducting our analytical work, we depend upon the concepts of traditional agricultural economics: price elasticities of supply and demand, externalities, and consumer preference.

The low price-elasticity of both supply and demand means that markets do not self-correct much in the face of low prices that result from policies designed to provide consumers with a safe, abundant supply of food. That leaves us with two general policy options: price support programs or income support programs.

Income support programs are the more expensive of the two and generally leave farmers in a weakened financial condition as evidenced by the current situation in US agriculture.

Price support programs are less expensive, provide a measure of safety in the case of a crop failure like 2012, and require more finesse in management. We believe price support programs using supply management tools are the best choice.

To reiterate, neither type of support program would be necessary if supply and demand quantities responded as quickly to reduced prices as is suggested by the graphs in economics textbooks.

Many economic activities result in consequences that are not priced into the cost of the product. These are called externalities and they can be both positive and negative. From a policy perspective, the problematic externalities are the negative ones that impose significant costs on others.

The brown dust that blew through Washington, DC on March 21st, 1935 was a negative externality caused by the combination of poor soil management practices and a severe drought. The need for the Des Moines Water Works to build a new treatment plant to remove nitrates from the city's drinking water supply was caused by the leaching of fertilizer from farm fields upstream. That is an externality that is not priced into the cost of a bushel of corn.

Whether it is through regulations or some other mechanism, we believe there is a need for policies that seek to minimize significant negative externalities.

When it comes to who determines what to produce, we vote for consumers every time. If they want cage-free eggs, GMO-free grains, or humanely raised meat animals, then that is what farmers need to produce.

The last principle we want to identify in this 1,000th column is “Thou shalt not beggar thy neighbor.” Stated simply, we are not interested in developing policies that are designed to enable one set of farmers to put another set of farmers out of business.

As we stand at this milestone, we express our gratitude to our colleagues, publishers, readers, and supporters for making it possible for us to have spent the last nineteen years doing something we love, writing this column. Without you, none of this would have been possible. Thanks!

Policy Pennings Column 1000

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