

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR FORAGE EXTENSION?

Carl S. Hoveland

Terrell Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Crop & Soil Sciences, University of Georgia

The title for this talk suggests that some of you younger folks may be out of a job as forage extension specialists in the future. This is a possible worst case scenario, but it doesn't need to happen. I would like to address three aspects of this potential problem. 1. Why forage extension funding can be expected to decrease or end. 2. Forage extension needs will increase but change. 3. How forage extension will be funded in the future. When planning for the future, it might be well to remember the wise words of Edmund Burke, "You can never plan the future by the past."

Why forage extension funding can be expected to decrease or end.

This sounds like the attitude of a pessimistic old man. My Uncle Sophus, who had a small dairy farm near our farm, was a born pessimist. Even when adequate rainfall had crops looking good, he would always predict that it can't last as it will get dry again. He was also the last farmer to adopt any new innovation as he knew it wouldn't work. In contrast, I am an optimist and believe strongly in forage extension, but I do think we need to be realistic and examine some major problems that face us in respect to future funding.

National and state funding of forage extension in the future is in jeopardy for a variety of reasons:

1. Government spending and borrowing has gone on at an accelerating rate in recent years, resulting in an unprecedented national debt of over **seven trillion dollars**. Interest payments on this money owed to China, Middle Eastern oil countries, and others take an increasing chunk out of our national budget.
2. Our population continues to have a higher percentage of elderly people, requiring more money for Social Security and Medicare. Health care costs for indigent people continue to rise. Veterans benefit costs add more pressure to the budget. A huge array of entitlement costs consume an increasing percentage of both national and state government budgets.
3. Confidence in the USA dollar has fallen, resulting in its depreciation compared to major foreign currencies.
4. We will become a poorer nation as energy and food costs rise and consume a greater portion of consumer income. Voter resistance to higher taxes will put pressure on governments.
5. The heady days of wild spending by Congress are over as they will be forced to reduce spending by cutting programs. Politicians will find it easiest to cut programs that affect the

fewest voters. Agriculture is a likely target, especially in funding areas without a strong commodity lobby like those of corn, soybean, cotton, or sugar. Forages are not notable for having a strong national lobby! Even a stronger American Forage and Grassland Council lobby is not likely to be sufficient. If you think elimination of extension funding unlikely in the future, consider that it has already happened in countries like New Zealand and England that had excellent extension services. It can happen here! The axe is most likely to fall on extension funding in the Federal budget, with funding continuing only in states having a strong agricultural base or better economies.

Forage extension needs will increase but will change.

Funding or no funding, there is no question that livestock producers will have a greater need of professional extension help in the future. Continuing education programs will be needed for livestock producers. Major changes will occur in the needs of clientele being served. It would be foolish to try predicting how grassland use and ruminant livestock production will change but there are some omens of the future:

1. Limited, but growing, production of pasture-finished (usually with some grain) “natural” beef without hormone feeding will require extension advice for high quality, well-managed pastures.
2. Continued global warming will cause shifts in adaptation of cool and warm season forage species. Forecasts for the southeastern USA are for hotter summers, shorter winters, and more erratic distribution of rainfall, thus resulting in greater stress on forage plants. My personal observations in Georgia indicate that during the past 15 years there has been a northward movement of bahiagrass and bermudagrass into areas previously dominated by tall fescue. Cultivars with less cold tolerance such as Tifton 85 bermudagrass are now adapted farther north than previously. These changes will affect livestock production systems where extension assistance would be useful.
3. Legumes will play a much bigger role in future pasture production as nitrogen fertilizer costs remain high. Successful legume production requires better management than grass-nitrogen fertilizer systems. Superior persistent pasture legume cultivars are available but increased stress from warmer and drier conditions may make them less well adapted in the future. More stress-tolerant cool and warm season legumes will be needed in the future. However, development of these legumes is problematical since state and federal funding of forage breeding has declined.
4. Increasing cost of feed grains, energy costs, equipment, and waste disposal will put pressure on feedlot dairy production, making irrigated grazing dairies a cheaper and easier way to produce milk in the southern USA. This requires expertise in maintenance and grazing management of high quality pastures during much of the lactation cycle. Extension advice will be needed on problems such as surplus forage for stored feed, cooling of cows with misters, fencing systems, and legume systems.
5. It is likely that the use of forages planted for wildlife food plots will continue to grow. The challenges of difficult environmental sites require extension expertise that is often lacking by

many managers. This is a major area of growth as natural areas are utilized for hunting and for nature lovers who enjoy wildlife.

6. As methodology improves for cellulosic ethanol production, agronomic advice will be needed to produce the crops used for this purpose. For example, switchgrass could be a major enterprise on large land areas not well suited to other crop production. Extension expertise will be important for successful production of this high-yielding energy crop, which has much greater potential than utilizing corn, a valuable feed and food crop, for ethanol production.

7. Since the average age of experienced livestock producers in the USA is over 60 years, it is likely that many future novice producers will lack this knowledge base and be in need of forage expertise from extension.

How forage extension will be funded in the future.

Most Southern forage extension specialists receive only a token amount of support money for travel and other expenses. Unless they are content to remain in their offices, they must secure small grants from industry and commodity groups to support their visits to farms and meetings in and out of their state. Many also do applied research that requires additional grant money. As Federal monies for extension dry up, some states are likely to close out extension positions as retirements occur. This has already occurred. Tenure is likely to be abolished at universities in the future, which would make it much easier for administrators to terminate a faculty member when budgets are short. It has been suggested that extension should be self-supporting with a user-pay fee system to support salaries of extension specialists. I think we recognize the difficulties of operating such a system within a university.

Before we address options for funding forage extension specialists in the future, let's look at what makes extension so successful in the USA.

1. Most counties have one or more extension workers to serve clients with free information. At present, there is a trend toward appointing regional agents that work as forage and livestock production specialists in several counties. This facilitates the development and delivery of educational programs. It is an effective system but difficult to initiate as there is often strong political resistance to such a system.
2. Extension specialists are available to assist county and regional agents, providing expertise to solve special problems and find solutions.
3. Educational meetings are held to update agents and train producers in improved technology.
4. Information on cultivars, fertilizers, pesticides, or other products is based on field testing and is **unbiased**. Producers have come to trust extension to give them good recommendations that are not biased in favoring a particular name brand.
5. Information is available in various forms at county extension offices and on internet web sites.

6. Extension offers leadership in developing state grassland councils and other organizations for educational meetings and interaction with other producers.
7. Extension services are free and paid for through taxes.

With such a fabulous program of service, it seems a pity to see it destroyed through lack of funding. It is critical that a serious effort be made in each state to do a more effective job of lobbying to preserve this program as long as possible. State AFGC grassland councils need to become more visible and let **both rural and urban** politicians know the value of forages in their state. Grasslands are important to our society, but the average urban person hardly knows we exist. They may not even know what the words “forage crops” mean. The future of forage extension specialists is at risk in some states. The financial crunch is coming and we need to be prepared. I am hopeful that with strong effort, extension can have a future once our case is made.

However, even with strong lobbying efforts, it is possible that extension will be wiped out in years to come. If that happens, what are the options in providing reliable forage management information to producers?

1. Private consultants are touted as a solution. The difficulty with this is that producers have come to expect extension information to be free and most are not willing to pay for it as is the case with consultants in the business and industrial world. The New Zealand experience of terminating extension saw a proliferation of ex-extension agents who went into the consulting business but soon found that a lot of their old clients were not willing to pay for their help. Many, especially larger producers, were willing to hire experienced competent consultants, but the majority were not. The number of private consultants eventually declined. I suspect that we would have a similar experience. Thus, the majority of producers would be untouched by paid consultants.
2. Consulting companies would likely develop and provide a range of consultants with different kinds of expertise. They could provide a range of services that might be more appealing to a producer. A group practice would also attract well qualified persons and might help ensure that they operate more as professionals.
3. Private seed, fertilizer, pesticide, and fence companies currently provide extension information and would do so in the future. There is no doubt that well trained persons from a company could be of great assistance in helping producers to soil test and fertilize, plant correctly, and manage grazing of pastures. Unfortunately, some would be more sales persons than advisors and not have adequate updated training. More serious is that one would not expect these people to be totally unbiased in their recommendations of cultivars and other products.
4. Commodity groups, marketing organizations, or business cooperatives could employ extension specialists to serve their member producers as advisors, provide educational material, and operate training classes. This system has been highly successful in New Zealand where the Dairy Board milk marketing organization provides extension specialists to serve its dairy farmer members. Such a program never developed among New Zealand sheep and beef cattle farmers.

In Brazil, well-trained extension specialists are employed by large farmer-owned cooperative soybean, corn, and sugarcane processing and marketing organizations to provide a high level of service to their farmer clientele. In the USA, such an internal extension program operates quite successfully in the broiler industry where feed and poultry meat processing and marketing companies provide service to their poultry farmers.

In the USA, large milk processing and marketing companies could provide extension assistance to their dairy farmers if there were no publicly supported service. In the wildlife area, wild turkey or white tail deer organizations could provide extension advisors to their members. It is difficult to see how it would function for beef cow-calf producers unless they would be willing to pay an annual fee for service, which seems highly unlikely. Overall, destruction of the extension service will not only eliminate potential jobs for talented and well-trained forage extension specialists but also lower management and agricultural production efficiency.

The future of forage extension.

The heady days of adequate funding for excellent forage extension programs are over. In the future, severe federal deficits will reduce and may eventually eliminate funds for forage extension. It is likely that extension funding at the state level will also be reduced and may even be eliminated in some states unless grassland lobby groups can mount effective support campaigns. Forage extension programs have had a notable record of accomplishment in the past and they are needed in the future. Changes in grassland production and utilization will need extension expertise even more in the future. If public funding is not continued in the future, there are some alternatives but none of them are a good substitute for the present publicly supported extension system. Younger forage extension specialists are likely to face new challenges and changes in their careers. Many will have rewarding and exciting careers but it will be survival of the fittest in a tough world.