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COMMUNICATION OF ANIMAL PRODUCTION INFORMATION: AN ADVISER'S VIEWPOINT*

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The communication gap between groups in society is widening rapidly; at the same time there is an information explosion. More and more people are collecting information, and computer analysis has led to an abundance of data. Amid this abundance there is a tendency not to worry about communication.

In obtaining views from farmers, advisory officers and scientists, one point was established — there is a communication problem. Another point evident was that each person thought it was the fault of someone else. Scientists blamed advisers, advisers blamed scientists and farmers blamed everyone.

From the point of view of the Ministry of Agriculture (MAF), what can be done? The Advisory Services Division views the communication field as an important one. A three-man committee has investigated the communications problem and produced a report with some sound recommendations that it is hoped will be implemented.

Many of the views expressed in this paper are in agreement with the report, but some ideas go into more detail and are mainly personally-held beliefs.

STRUCTURE OF MAF

The structure and lines of communication of animal production information are shown in Fig. 1. The thickness of the arrows illustrates the relative amount of information and communication that theoretically occurs.

The distinction needs to be made between information, its presentation and its communication. Information is the basic data. Presentation may be by medium of a published article, a conference address, a television programme, etc. Communication is information that means the same thing to both the communicator and his audience.

INFORMATION FLOW

The flow of information from the scientist through the Farm Advisory Officer (FAO) to the farmer is, with one or two qualifications, quite satisfactory. The first qualification is that research results are often given directly to farmers. Farmers do not want to be spoken to in scientific terms and it is gener-

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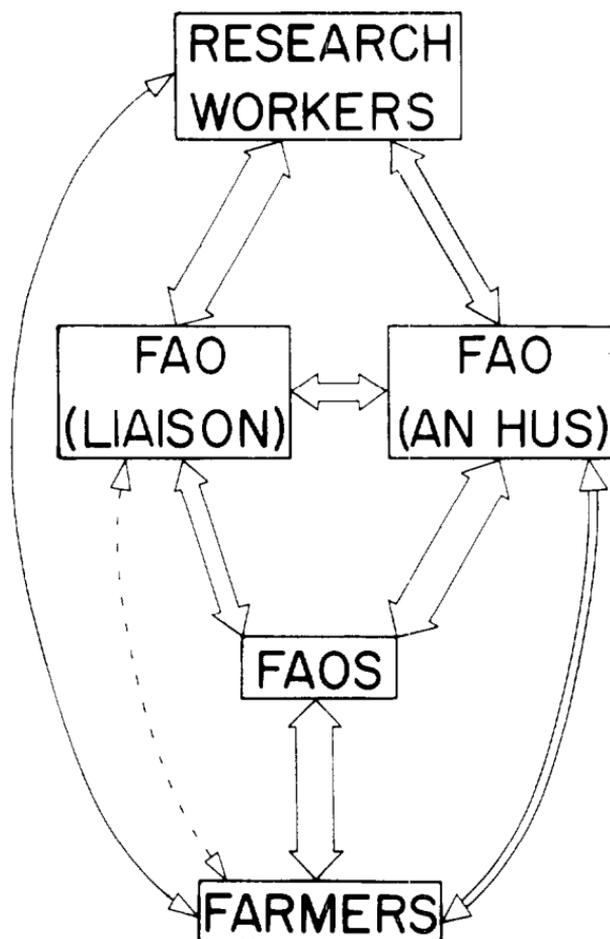


FIG. 1: Structure and lines of communication of animal production information (MAF).

ally true that research workers are poor extension workers. Parker (1970) makes this point very strongly. More important, the direct scientist-farmer approach means the FAO is not involved, and lack of involvement brings about a lack of communication.

The second qualification is that much information is history, as sources are published proceedings from conferences and scientific journals. This criticism is answered to some extent by the production of annual reports from research centres and Field Research Division. Here an attempt is made to tell what work is being attempted, who is doing it, and how it is going. However, Harbord (1973) emphasizes that annual re-

ports can be notable for creating the impression that something is going on, without revealing what it may be. For example, the 1970/71 annual report of the Field Research Division contains a three-page section covering 14 trials on induction of early oestrus in ewes. The only relevant points appeared to be:

- (1) Results were unavailable or not worked out for 12 of the 14 trials.
- (2) Only two trials produced lambing results.
- (3) Topping data with some information on sponge losses were given for 4 trials.

It is little wonder that advisers do not read everything that comes across their desks.

The flow of information back from the farmer through the FAO to the scientist or directly to the scientist could be radically improved. However, a reasonable bush telegraph has developed although it is doubtful whether this has occurred as a result of the desire of the FAO.

COMMUNICATIONS

The written word alone is not communication. A survey of farmers by Manning (1973) showed that only 2% of farmers assessed "the literature" as the most valuable form of advice. There is a need to develop lines of communication but these must be simple as communication efficiency is affected by personalities.

DEVELOPMENT OF LINES OF COMMUNICATION

The problems have been defined but what can be done about them? The structure for achieving good communication is evident in Fig. 1. However, a major criticism is that it is a passive rather than an active structure. It is there, but there does not appear to be any real attempt to make it work. The information flow is reasonable; it is communication that fails. For too long we have attempted to communicate too much from the research worker down to the extension worker and farmer, rather than from the farmer upward. Communication has been a one-way street and this needs to be altered before much improvement can be made.

FARM ADVISORY OFFICER (LIAISON)

Liaison between research and advisory workers is one field that could be improved. The role of the liaison man is one of suck, sift and blow from the scientist to the extension worker and vice versa. While the idea of an FAO (Liaison) stationed at a research centre is good, there are a number of reasons

why liaison has not improved. A two-year term of appointment is not long enough and Baumgart (1970) stresses that there needs to be more than one Liaison FAO for the whole of New Zealand. Newsletters from the FAO (Liaison) are good for arousing interest and help keep FAOs up-to-date. But planned visits to each region by the liaison officer are needed to consolidate the newsletter and enable the FAOs in the field to have a contact point for feedback to research workers.

FAOs (Liaison) at research centres should work with commercial, university, DSIR and Dairy Board research workers as well as those within MAF.

FARM ADVISORY OFFICER (ANIMAL HUSBANDRY)

Where does the FAO (An. Hus.) fit? Figure 2 shows the sources of information he uses and his methods of communication.

An abstracting service set up by some FAOs (An. Hus.) has been in operation for 3 years and is becoming extremely useful, especially in areas where ready access to a good library is limited. The other important link is the FAO (Liaison). The FAO (An. Hus.) and FAO (Liaison) must work more closely together before much improvement in communication will be achieved. This does not mean that FAOs and scientists should not communicate privately, but it is one more way of establishing contacts.

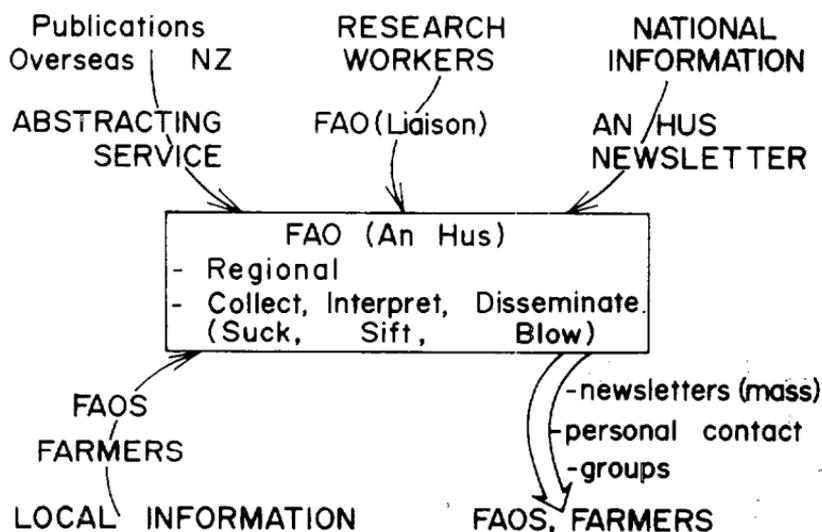


FIG. 2: Information sources and methods used for communication by FAOs (An. Hus.).

The FAO (An. Hus.) is a regional man based at a regional head office. Liaison is his number-one priority. His job is to interpret the information coming from research centres, to travel throughout his region keeping farmers and fellow FAOs up-to-date, and to obtain comments from the field and feed them back to research centres. After 2 to 3 years in the field, FAOs (An. Hus.) and some other FAOs should spend 2 to 3 weeks at a research centre doing a specific project. This could be a review of research into one particular aspect of animal production. While there have already been some excellent review articles from research centres, there is a mountain of work to do and this is possibly one way of helping.

The FAO (An. Hus.) must not attempt to become too specialized. Rather, he must maintain a broad front on animal husbandry matters. His job is to complement the role of the FAO, not to take it over. Because of this, the basis of future recruitment of FAOs (An. Hus.) needs to be reviewed. It should be understood that FAOs (An. Hus.) are liaison people; their job is communication, not just an intense interest in one particular avenue of animal production.

GENERAL FARM ADVISORY OFFICER

What can the general FAO do to improve his relationship with scientists and farmers? As far as research workers are concerned, I do not think that mass visits to research centres by large groups of FAOs are of much value. Apart from the cost of such trips, in many instances both FAOs and research workers appear to be ill prepared for useful discussion. Small groups of 10 to 12 FAOs (not necessarily from the same area) are a better idea.

A new FAO recruit, within 12 months of joining, should visit a research centre with an FAO (An. Hus.) or a senior FAO from his area. There he should spend some time with the FAO (Liaison) finding out how the system works, what liaison FAOs do, where things are and who is who at research centres, but not necessarily the details of what is going on.

RESEARCH WORKERS

What can the research workers do to help? First they could improve the readability of their papers. Alternatively, perhaps there is a need for two types of paper, one for scientific journals and one for a modified annual report. There is a need to condense the annual report and collate information on similar topics into a review of work done and in progress rather than the listing of work as is now the case. Secondly, scientists generally could be more forthcoming. In my limited experience research workers tend to tell us what they want us to know and not what we want to know.

Scientists claim there is a need for extension workers to visit research stations to find out what is going on and how scientists think and work. There is an equally strong claim — perhaps stronger — that research workers need to find out how the extension worker thinks and acts.

THE FARMER

Manning (1973) showed that in Hawke's Bay 41% of farmers surveyed thought the advisory service provided by MAF was excellent, or very helpful, while 92% thought it was of some assistance. Perhaps farmer change is not fast enough, and advisers' time could be better spent, but generally there appears to be reasonable communication between FAOs and farmers. One of the best ways to get the message across is to use example farmers as the extension medium.

Although the new policy of employing only graduates as advisers is a good one, I have two strong criticisms of MAF's advisory approach. The first is that we are not professional enough, and the second that Advisory Services Division should become divorced from the regulatory activities of the Ministry. In general, however, the establishment of good relationships between farmers, FAOs and research workers will take time and the success of these relationships will depend to a large degree on the personalities involved.

CONCLUSIONS

There are communication problems. The structure for improving relationships between scientists, extension workers and farmers exists. It is a case of making it work. An increased number of FAOs stationed at research centres as liaison officers is considered important. Regional specialists are also vital as liaison men and contact points for feedback from farmers to research workers. Relationships between research and advisory workers need to be strengthened, and it is critical for communication to be in an upward direction to research workers as well as in the downward one-way direction they are now.

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