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An invitation is extended to all those involved in the field of animal production to apply for membership of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production at our website www.nzsap.org.nz

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 1997

‘Time to Change’

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The topics discussed in the fifty-six Presidential addresses preceding this one can be broadly categorised into those that are personal statements on personal research areas and those that are ‘tub-thumping’ about the Society or agricultural research in general. In recent times, Presidents Sykes (1986), Jury (1990) and Nicol (1992) have all thumped their tubs and exhorted the Society to change both in attitude and modus operandi. Alas, their exhortations have had little impact. They pointed the direction but we did not follow. So it is my intention to try again, for the simple reason that if we do not change, we will not survive as a Society, or maybe even as animal scientists. You may feel this is over-stating the case but there are two major issues facing us. Firstly, science in general is not held in high regard by the community and, secondly, there is an impression among many that animal agriculture in New Zealand is a sunset industry. These are two threats to our survival as a Society which our relative wealth will not prevent. My contention is that there are four relatively straightforward ways for the Society to counter these threats. These are:

1. To record, and publicise our achievements over the last 50 years
2. To focus on the potential for improvements in animal productivity (and profitability)
3. To focus on the potential to improve the quality of food from animals
4. To become more active politically.

NZSAP - Are we addressing our objectives?

The objectives of the Society were formulated in 1941 and are still relevant today, although they need an overhaul. These objectives are:

1. To provide an organisation to bring about active collaboration of all members in the field of animal production
2. To provide an annual meeting of members at which papers will be read and discussed
3. To take such action as may be deemed necessary to foster improvement in animal production.

These objectives are certainly addressed by the current activities of the Society through the organisation of an Annual conference but the question must be asked as to whether this is anywhere near enough, given the current environment. Two things need to happen. The Society needs to formulate a set of new (and more specific) objec-

tives and the Management Committee needs to report each year on the way it has addressed these objectives. This, of course, sounds very FoRST-like but such a system would ensure that the Society progresses in its chosen directions.

The Annual Conference

The NZSAP Conference is one of the few conferences in New Zealand where University, extension, farming and CRI personnel can get together. Not surprisingly, given these groupings, the conference cannot be wholly cutting-edge science or technology development, but a mixture.

Papers presented at our conferences can be categorized as:

1. Science - strategic/applied
2. Technology development/extension
3. Product testing.

I believe the quality of the NZSAP conference is under-rated because of the failure to recognise the differences in the types of information presented. To illustrate the point, I remember, around 1980, tiring of presentations relating pasture allowance to animal performance. There are only a limited number of scientific principles that can be established from feeding and weighing and all of them were repetitively obvious. However, this work was developing the technology of pasture management to maximise animal production. Judgement of such papers as good or bad science was incorrect. They were a vital part of the development of grazing technology.

Failure to recognise the difference between science and technology development, has led to the Society being held in lower regard, by both members and non-members, than ought to be the case. The fact that there are many very good animal scientists in New Zealand who choose not to belong to NZSAP is a cause for concern. Improving the distinction between the science and technology development sides of our activities can only improve the chances of attracting new members.

Nevertheless, this is not the whole story and the Society still needs to strive to maintain/improve the standards of its formal conference sessions. As at any conference, some poor papers are presented each year (in spite of valiant efforts at quality control by the Management Committee) which do not represent progress in technology development or new knowledge/discovery in science. Presenters of such papers need to be challenged.

The conference has had a massive upswing in the number of papers presented in recent years - as Shackell (1996) has shown. It is no coincidence that the upswing occurred when FORST first appeared. Many of the 'extra' papers have been fulfilling FORST reporting requirements. This has led to a conference of 3? days of end-to-end 10 minute papers. Thankfully, miniposters have arrived and there is still enough room for a contract session and the LIC lecture. But where are the workshops, debates, extended discussions and review papers? There simply is insufficient time, resulting in the Society being in danger of becoming a bureaucratic instrument of the science system rather than a creative part of it. The conference must become less of a procession.

Introduction of more miniposters may be one mechanism to introduce more 'creative' time to the Annual Conference but many other aspects of the conference need re-evaluating, including timing, location and how the conference is organised. Currently, much of the conference flavour/structure is the responsibility of the local organising committee. The programme is developed with a lashing of serendipity, depending upon the offerings of members. I believe that there should be a national programme committee that solicits papers for specific themes and organises discussions etc, as appropriate. This could be done very easily and without impinging too greatly on the sovereign rights of local committees. The net result would be that we would be charting a course rather than being totally servile to the ForST system.

Past and future improvement of animal production: the role of NZSAP

Has NZSAP been successful over the years? What has it achieved? A lot - is the short answer. It has been the formal and informal forum for discussion and development of grazing management, reproductive and animal breeding technologies, to mention a few of the persistent themes during various stages of the development of the Society. All of these were achieved with a background of underpinning science.

We can be justifiably proud of the Occasional Publications, some of which have been extraordinarily successful, such as *Livestock Feeding on Pasture*, and *Mineral Requirements of Grazing Ruminants*. Nevertheless, the contribution of animal science and NZSAP to animal production in NZ is not well described and I doubt that our Occasional Publications sit on Treasury bookshelves. We need an audit of the scientific achievements arising from primary production research and if, as I suspect, much of this information is already available - it needs to be dusted off and re-presented.

Animal science has played a major part in the last 50 years to provide the technologies to massively improve the productivity of grazing animals. NZSAP has played a very significant role in all of this. However, we are now in an environment where the primary industries are portrayed as sunset industries, Government funding for primary production research is being reduced in some areas and the public regard for science is low and falling (whereas its regard for pseudo-science is apparently increasing).

If we believe in the value of our science and technology, then we need to take action to counter such trends. We need to rise off our complacency and make much more noise than has been the case hitherto. NZSAP is an entirely appropriate umbrella under which to do this and it needs to become more 'political' in order to address objective 3.

For example, has NZSAP ever spelt out the potential for science to improve animal production in New Zealand? Yes, but it needs to continue to do so. How much production could be reasonably expected per hectare from high genetic merit dairy cows, fed supplements, giving milk of low fat and high casein content and possessing a gene linked to high lactational persistency? What are the improvements in animal and human health that can be addressed with transgenic technology? If feed conversion efficiency in a growing pig is 2:1, what is the potential for a growing lamb? Many such questions could be asked, but my point is that we need to demonstrate, and indeed shout about, the potential for what we do, or our passivity will be taken as a signal that we don't really believe in the potential ourselves.

The consumer and new technology

The production of 'safe' food is essential. Over the last 3 or 4 decades milk and red meat consumption have been portrayed by the medical profession and popular press as being at best things that we should be limiting our consumption of, and at worst, agents that we shorten our lives with. On top of this, there is the swing to organic food, natural remedies etc etc. Consumers regard 'natural' as safe - largely because they are blissfully unaware of the vast range of toxic substances that can be found - especially in plant food - albeit usually at levels which do no harm.

Transgenics and hormonal stimulants are two recent technologies which consistently concern consumers in Europe and North America. There are potentially large benefits to human and animal health from the use of these technologies providing it can be shown that animal welfare is not compromised. Food from transgenics is already in the market-place and, I would suggest, may be safer to consume than organic produce where the safety tends to be assumed rather than measured.

What is the position of the Society in this debate? We have sat quietly and observed for a long time. If we believe in what we do, we should be organising the debate, lobbying appropriately, liaising with overseas societies etc, and in particular, making sure that consumers are correctly informed. These newer technologies have a role to play in animal production and we sit back and participate minimally in the discussion. We need to meet the challenge if we believe there are net gains to be made from using new technology.

A theme which will probably become more frequent at the Annual Conference is the role of animal products in human nutrition and human health. There is still much debate within medical circles as to whether animal fats, for example, cause or are neutral in relation to the development of atherosclerosis. To its credit, the Society addressed this debate in the early 1970's with an Occasional

Publication and, more recently, at the instigation of Peter Brumby via a Royal Society Symposium in 1996 entitled 'Red Meat and Human Health'. There are many, many more opportunities. These range from improving the 'quality' (texture, flavour and shelf-life etc) of meat and milk, enhancing their nutritional value; assessing whether sectors of the population are identifiable as being at risk from meat and milk consumption. With milk, there is considerable commercial interest in identifying and enhancing the known (and unknown) biological activities in milk which might improve human health.

The Society needs to encourage and help develop these newer areas of importance while at the same time maintaining its thrust in enhancing the productivity and efficiency of farm animals.

To do so will require that we attune ourselves to the role of meat and milk in the nutrition and health of humans. To achieve this will require significant input from health researchers and again NZSAP is an entirely appropriate umbrella under which to recruit such inputs.

Creating the future

NZSAP is at the crossroads - and has been for several years. We now need to derive a strategy for the Society to lift its image, its membership and its impact. The objectives of the Society and the operational activities of the Management Committee need to be re-addressed. I personally would like to see more involvement in Society conferences from Industry research managers who tend to have only loose connections with University and CRI

research personnel. Clear enunciation of the research requirements and targets of the Animal Industries can only be helpful to those undertaking primary production research. A reciprocal flow of opinion back to research managers may also be helpful! Little discussion is occurring at the moment and the Society could provide a valuable forum for communication regarding research targets..

The future development of the Society will take place amid dramatic improvement in systems of communication. We are very fortunate to have captured John McEwan's enthusiasm to set up the NZSAP site on the Internet. This site is a first among New Zealand Societies and will, I am sure, be a major route of communication for NZSAP members in the future as well as for technology transfer. These changes will continue to make the world smaller and provide an opportunity for NZSAP to be more audible. The scientific and wider community needs to hear the voice of NZSAP. At the moment we are very, very, quiet.

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