

Commodity Groups Have a Message for Us

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Many voices are heard in the professional agricultural arena. The new wave of management administrators, once removed from the "tower" researchers and several times removed from the field researchers, have lost the ability to hear the latter and may be losing the ability to hear the former. Growers and commodity groups apparently are not even within the frequency range. It is time to start listening to the commodity groups, or they might go elsewhere to be heard—and we will be listening to ourselves again.

Commodity organizations come in all sizes and shapes. Many work effectively at the local level. When dealing with national problems, however, such groups often become complex, and relating their activities to the business of producing a local commodity may be difficult. Similarly, some plant pathologists are involved at the local level, working to control diseases or produce crops economically, and others are involved in obscure activities hard to identify as the business of plant pathology.

How do plant pathologists interact with commodity groups? Are plant pathologists interested in solving disease problems at the crop production level? Or is such problem solving to be faced only when it cannot be avoided? How do management administrators interact with commodity groups? Is interaction on the local production level limited to finding funds? Has the administrators' involvement in world activities influenced plant pathologists to neglect the problem-solving aspect of plant disease control?

Over the years, I have found that local commodity groups are aware of the occasional occurrence of plant diseases, usually after a crisis-type epiphytotic. Often, these growers supply funds to agronomists and experiment stations to solve disease problems in crop production. Many growers believe their problems—from on-farm mistakes to low prices for their crops—can be solved by a new crop variety, when in actuality much of the value of a new variety is in its resistance to disease.

Local commodity groups support crop research and want to be involved in making certain decisions. Their support, in the form of annual or multiyear financial grants, equipment, and/or cooperative experiments, is transmitted to experiment station personnel and interested researchers through commodity research committees. These committees are made up of growers who usually have a sincere interest in a particular commodity and probably even a personal stake in the successful growing of the crop. Members are successful farmers and businessmen elected or appointed by their peers. They recognize the value of research and new techniques as well as the problems of production. Plant diseases are not new to them; they may not know all the scientific terms, but they understand crop loss.

Growers have crop experiences not found in books or on experiment stations. To them, plant disease means losses in yield or quality, and the effects of weather often overshadow the complex nature of disease problems. Their solutions include buying new equipment, remodeling old equipment, changing cultural practices, modifying the environment, planting new varieties, and using folklore remedies. When enough growers experience the same problem, the research committee eventually hears about it and, often with the aid of university or commercial agriculturalists, identifies the research need. The problem is local and current and relates to loss of income.

In my experience, commodity research committees recognize that research must be ongoing for new knowledge and technology to develop, and commodity groups are willing to support long-term research directed toward solving the current problem. Can we as plant pathologists spend all our time defining the problem? The grower is not working at the 5% level of significance!

Commodity groups want to be kept informed about the research they are supporting and to be involved in the planning. Some groups lobby at legislative sessions for research staffing, physical plants, and funds; some positions in plant pathology result directly from commodity lobbying activities. In the past, long-range research activities were emphasized, but times, fund sources, and farming were different then. Today, the demand is for direct problem-solving research.

The new generation of growers is interested in what is happening on the plant disease scene. What disease may move from a minor problem to a major hazard in a highly concentrated crop? How will new varieties respond to new or old diseases in the production area? What influence will new crops have on plant diseases in the area? These are legitimate concerns. Historically, new varieties have changed the disease situation with little or no forewarning from the plant pathologists. New crops commonly introduce new diseases to complicate the problems of crop rotation and production. Unfortunately, professional agriculturalists, including plant pathologists, often show little concern for potential disease hazards.

Pathologists tend to react to plant diseases after the fact. In 1961, Mercada and Lantican reported that corn with Texas male-sterile cytoplasm was economical but susceptible to southern leaf blight. And then it happened! Where was the warning to the corn growers? In some disease situations, plant pathologists cannot respond until after the fact, but more effort could be exerted to point out the potential hazards of diseases. The breeder of resistant varieties may have become the one farmers identify with plant disease control.

What is the message commodity groups have for plant pathologists? I believe they are telling us to identify with *controlling* plant diseases. They want us to be concerned with solving the disease problems that result in economic losses—to be concerned with identifying potential hazards *before* economic losses result. They want us to participate in their deliberations on the importance of plant diseases. They want our help, our skills, our knowledge, and our interest in growing their crops.