"Instant Proceedings" at Small Farm Conferences

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Five Regional Small Farm Conferences were held in 1978 to identify specific problems of small farmers, seek solutions, and provide more direct access to programs that are intended to help small farm families.

The conferences were sponsored by USDA, the Community Services Administration (CSA) and ACTION.

"Instant proceedings" were produced the first evening of each two-day conference. This was accomplished through a Texas A&M University computer which summarized and ranked the problems identified by the small farmer delegates.

More than 400 small farmer delegates representing all states, Puerto Rico, and Guam participated in the five conferences.

They identified major problems they face. Meeting in work groups of 10 to 15 delegates, they considered:
- access to capital and credit
- production and management
- marketing
- additional income
- land use and water
- energy needs
- farm family living.

Ovid Bay is coordinator of the Small Farm Program of USDA-SEA.

Recorders in each group (between five and ten at each conference) furnished the computer team a written list of problems identified by the delegates at the close of the first day. Then, lists of problems, and ratings by the delegates, were transmitted by phone (long distance) from a portable computer terminal to the Texas A&M computer. Long distance charges averaged about $150 per conference.

The ranking of the problems came out of the computer on an 8½-inch-wide printout. The lists were cut and pasted by topic on letterhead pages prepared in advance. The first day results were taken to a local printer about 9 p.m.

The printer delivered about 500 copies of each report by 7 a.m. the next morning for use the second day. Covers for the reports were printed in advance. Each regional report usually contained 20 pages plus cover. In advance of each conference, a local printer was found who could meet the time schedule. This printing schedule was essential to the effort.

The "instant proceedings" were very popular with the delegates, and also impressed conference observers. The second day, the farmer delegates recommended to USDA and the other agencies and organizations some solutions to specific problems.

The delegates also rated the top 20 problems identified within each work group during the first day's ratings. The composite ratings of the top problems identified by all delegates were entered in the computer for a computer printout summary of each regional conference.

Conference summary reports also include reports from the recorders and facilitators, recommendations by the delegates, a list of the delegates and observers, and state offices of USDA Rural Development Committees, CSA, and ACTION. The second summary report was printed at the home base after the conference.

The computer team included J.C. Massey, Department of Forest Science, Texas A&M University, who attended the five conferences to work on the proceedings, and C.A. Fasick, Forest Resource Economics Research, USDA Forest Service.

Some conclusions from the conferences were:
- There is a wide communications gap between the information available in Extension, research and USDA agencies and the limited resource farmers, in many instances.
- The single most important problem with federal pro-

grams intended for farmers is that too few small farmers know about or participate in them.

- Small farmers have not benefitted from Federal programs in proportion to their number or need.
- Delegates thought commodity prices were too low and costs too high.
- There is no effective national voice for the limited resource, small farmer.

To obtain a copy of a regional report or the national summary, write Ovid Bay, U.S. Department of Agriculture, SEA-Extension, Washington, D.C. 20250.