

FARM FAMILY DISPLACEMENT

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The nature and extent of financial distress in agriculture has been well documented and analyzed [4,5]. Several states have conducted surveys of farmers to ascertain financial conditions, among them Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, Texas, New York, and Colorado. It is not necessary or intended that we shall report the statistics here or spend our limited time in discussion of that phenomenon. Rather we should focus on the fact and problems of displacement of farm families — displacement that has been a consequence of financial distress.

A problem of discussion of displacement of families is the scarcity of data descriptive of the phenomenon. Though data on the financial condition of farmers are reasonably good, data that would indicate separation from farming and the actions of displaced persons are quite limited.

Two studies, one in Iowa and one in Missouri, provide some information about displaced families that suggests their likely responses to significant financial distress. In Iowa, 13 percent of displaced families left the state; 10 percent left the county of residence; 27 percent stayed in the county; and 49 percent occupy their farm house though they are effectively separated from the farming enterprises. Of those displaced and staying within the community, about 15 percent are unemployed; 13 percent are employed on local farms; 25 percent are employed in local agribusinesses; and the balance have other employment [3].

In Missouri, in one good, agricultural county more than 50 miles from a metropolitan area, 40 families were displaced because of financial distress. Five families left the state; two left the community; five families moved to residences in contiguous counties; five are off their farms but within the county; and 23 families are still on their farms, some occupied with much reduced farming activities, most with some off-farm employment [1,2].

Though the surveys in the two states were different and independent, they produced quite similar results. Indications are that only a small proportion of displaced families left the communities in which they lived; a large proportion stayed within their communities; and

many stayed within their farm homes. Some continued to farm on a limited scale while they took off-farm employment that was available.

The Issues

For the purposes of our group discussion it is appropriate that we make some assumptions (based on the limited observations) about actions of displaced farm families and that we then ask ourselves some questions about needs of displaced families, the private/public responsibilities to give assistance, and the likely programs/activities that would be useful to displaced persons.

The limited evidence indicates response to displacement or separation that includes:

1. A determined attempt to maintain some tie to farming or ranching, e.g. a greatly reduced home-farm operation or a limited leased-farm operation that would use family labor and salvagable machinery.
2. A strong preference to stay in the community and even to maintain residency in the farm home.
3. Serious attempts by family members to find off-farm employment in the community or within reasonable commuting distance from the home.
4. A willingness to undergo training/education that will improve or develop marketable skills or abilities.
5. Finally, a reluctant willingness to leave the community and accept employment that will insure survival of the family.

Questions about needs, responsibilities and actions include:

1. What are possible options for families who wish to maintain a "toe-hold" in farming?
2. What are likely employment opportunities in rural communities?
3. What can be done to expand the capacities of local towns and cities to absorb unemployed farm family members?
4. Whose responsibility is rural economic development, job creation, etc.?
5. What training/educational facilities and opportunities exist in rural areas?
6. Who should be responsible for those training/educational activities that are relevant to farm family needs?
7. What advising/counseling activities are needed by displaced farm families whose minds may be filled with uncertainties, fears, doubts, etc.?
8. Who is responsible for advice/counsel about the separation from farming, relocation possibilities, job opportunities, skills development, etc.?

Other questions about needs, responsibilities, and actions surely should be asked. They will be the basis for decisions about private/public policies and programs; expenditures on programs and activities;

and commitments of existing and new offices, agencies, programs, and personnel that will give assistance to distressed, displaced farm families.

The Discussion

There is little question that there is financial distress in agriculture, one consequence being displacement of some farm families. This is a regrettable phenomenon, but is it a public issue? Is it a problem that should be addressed by policy and programs at federal, state, and/or local levels?

From a national, perhaps a state, point of view, the question is debatable and it is being debated. Have farmers, by their own free will, made investment and operational decisions that have proved to be unwise? Or have they been induced to make land purchase and other decisions by government policy, programs, and pronouncements that have turned out to be inappropriate? Are specially directed policy and programs to alleviate distress and displacement warranted?

These questions will soon be answered by action or inaction of legislative bodies and public administrators who will decide whether assistance shall or shall not be extended to distressed and displaced persons. The decision will be reflected in the new food and agricultural policy legislation and perhaps in follow-up acts that address directly the displacement problem. Financial distress among farmers is certainly on the minds of congressmen; farm family displacement is not so obviously a concern.

From local, and perhaps state, points of view, the question of responsibility is moot. Financially distressed farmers and displaced families are community members, the electorate, the clientele of agencies, institutions, and commercial establishments. There is publicity about displacement and demands for actions that will relieve the distress. There will be policy and programs to give assistance to displaced families. The relevant questions will be: What kinds of aid? How will it be extended? Who will give the assistance? Who will pay for programs to benefit the displaced families? How will displaced families benefit?

Significant to these questions is an adequate definition of the problem of displacement. The existing research is not sufficient to identify the affected families, to understand their characteristics, to know their needs. We are aware of the response of a few families, in terms of their location, employment, and continuing activity (if any) in agriculture. We have some information about the families — size and members' ages, sex, etc. But the data necessary for the design of assistance programs are too few. For example, we don't know enough about educational levels and skills development to recommend those added training activities that will prepare family members for off-farm jobs.

A significant amount of work remains for us if we are to (1) describe

the needs of displaced farm families, (2) identify and perhaps develop the relevant programs of assistance, and (3) implement those programs via funding, assignment of professional responsibilities, and designation of places, times, and facilities for educational events. Needs descriptions will require additional, multi-disciplinary research — involving such specialists as psychologists, economists, sociologists, vocational educators, industrial engineers, business and professional educators, etc. We must study attitudes, fears, motivations, skills, ambitions, backgrounds, and lifestyles. We must understand the heterogeneous population that is our concern in order to develop meaningful counseling and educational programs.

Some of the educational and other programs, perhaps many of them, that will be useful to displaced families exist now. They are located in state and county agencies, in educational institutions, in churches and counseling services, and elsewhere. They include programs of higher education, vocational training, skills development, and business management. There is involved stress management, personality development, job placement, and performance counseling. Perhaps not available, but necessary to successful treatment of displacement, will be relocation services, resettlement loans, and community orientation programs.

A significant problem will be the organization of agencies and institutions and coordination of their programs and activities to achieve the ends of effective service/useful assistance to displaced families. It will surely be necessary for someone or some agency or institution to assume or assign responsibility for direction of the numerous programs that will be involved. But who should that someone or agency be?

This question must be resolved in the county, region, or state wherein the programs of assistance are to be organized and applied. A first step will be a declaration of intent by a governor, legislature, county commission, or other entity, to give service to displaced persons. Thus a policy with respect to displacement will be established. Then responsibility for direction/coordination of programs must be assigned. It can be given to one of several entities in the public bureaucracy, but will likely be assigned to an agency with existing responsibilities for the public welfare. Programs will be organized and directed to the displacement problem on the basis of needs, as determined by the research, and will involve those agencies and institutions with relevant capabilities. With commitment of sufficient financial and human resources (a function largely of the established policy) a meaningful set of programs will be developed. Application will bring at least some relief to the displaced families of the county, region, or state.

Conclusion

Displacement of farm families is an issue of policy as is the financial distress within agriculture that is occupying so much of our time,

thought, and effort. It is especially an issue at state and local levels where the impact of displacement is most keenly felt and where the opportunities for useful assistance are more realistic. Discussion of the issue is proceeding and some actions are coming out of it. Educators are assisting with the debate via the provision of factual information — though it is little and late. Added research appears to be developing rapidly and may soon be available to decision makers.

REFERENCES

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