

June 26, 1953

Mr. Paul Sanders, Editor
THE SOUTHERN PLANTER
Richmond, Virginia

Dear Paul:

It was a pleasure to see you again last Monday and to have the privilege of sitting with you to represent farm magazine editors on the committee appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture to review the Office of Information. I am convinced that Secretary Benson is determined to reorganize the USDA on a sound basis, if he can. I am writing to give you for the record the views I expressed last Monday. I thought they might be useful to you in preparing your report as chairman of the farm magazine section.

The job of reorganization is needed in the Office of Information of the USDA, throughout the USDA, and in every branch of our federal government. It is long overdue. The farmer is the scapegoat for everybody who complains about the high cost of government, but a casual study of costs would show that if the USDA were completely eliminated, Mr. U.S. Citizen would not even notice the difference in his tax bill. USDA is big, but not in proportion to what our government is costing us. (But as one fellow remarked, we're a lot better off than we would be if we were getting all the government we are paying for.)

Mere economy is not the major goal. Yet the Secretary of Agriculture is exactly right in his determination to see that we get full value for what we spend. First step for improving the Office of Information is to reorganize it to help it do the job it is intended to do. There are many obstacles to this job.

1. It is apparent that some individuals will be satisfied if they can get two or three more people assigned to

Mr. Paul Sanders, Editor
June 26, 1953

Page 2

help them do their own particular jobs. They are not concerned with over-all efficiency, but with more leg men to serve their particular media at no expense to them.

2. The civil service and seniority systems existing will prove a serious handicap to any logical transfer of personnel.

3. Bureau chiefs will exercise every possible block to guard their rights and privileges to supervise. They are very jealous of every clerk they can hold in their bureaus, and certainly will not favor a reorganization that will in any way deprive them of what they regard as their "rights".

4. Members of Congress are more interested in getting re-elected than they are in good government. They will continue to misappropriate money to give themselves patronage such as is enjoyed through the USDA Yearbook and other sources.

5. Practically anything that is done will make somebody feel like he has been hurt, and he will yell as loud as he can, especially if he is a member of another political party. And yelling is quite contagious, even among people who haven't been hurt.

I mention these factors because some think I may not be "practical" in my approach to the problem. If "being practical" means stooping to go under every political hazard, they are right. I think that the committee named by Secretary Benson to review the Office of Information should tackle this problem from the standpoint of what ought to be done, rather than what we think is the "politic thing to do". I frankly do not pretend to understand the political aspects of this situation and am not qualified to find political answers to political problems. I will do my best to help work out a solution that will help the USDA

Mr. Paul Sanders, Editor
June 26, 1953

Page 3

better perform its proper function in serving the American public.

There are several ways this may be approached. One is to examine first the job to be done. That, in general, means that the USDA is to supply certain services and information for the farmer, the congressman, the business man, and the consumer. Each of these may be reached or served by certain media, namely magazines, newspapers, radio, television, bulletins, movies, letters, billboards, and possibly others. The value and extent of coverage by each can be determined rather easily from circulation information now available. The attention that should be given each medium could then be evaluated, and proportions of available personnel could be assigned.

In this connection, it occurs to me that distinction should be made between publication of material and readership of material. The fact that a certain newspaper publishes everything that the USDA puts out does not mean it reaches the right people. It may have small circulation, or even large circulation may not be among the people who need the information. Mere distribution is not readership.

The same goes for the glamour of radio and TV. The USDA is not alone in the illusion that the world stops and listens when its program is on the air. Certainly, TV has impact for the audience that it reaches and it should be used, but it is foolish to toss everything else aside to gamble on the notion that the man you want will be in front of a TV set when you are on the air. A paragraph in a well-read magazine or newspaper may be a better way to reach some people.

What I am saying is that those of us who must, for reasons of space, be more selective, should not be neglected in favor of some medium that uses a lot more volume of material.

Working from the other end, there are research, informational, administrative, and regulatory data that need to be channeled to the business man, farmer, and consumer. If each separate bureau tries to work through the various media, as is

Mr. Paul Sanders, Editor
June 26, 1953

Page 4

now the case, there can be only one result: confusion and uneven distribution of the information. Example, a certain magazine has good contacts with Forest Service, poor with PMA. It receives and prints data from one, not the other, so that its readers get an incomplete story. Is this the fault of the magazine editor? Partly, but when you multiply that weakness by the number of bureaus in the USDA and the number of outlets available, it is clear that the system is more to blame.

Only by setting up an Office of Information that will serve as a clearing house for all branches of USDA and for all media of communication can we expect efficiency and economy to result, not to mention adequate flow of useful and essential information.

The farm magazines have not had the standing they have needed with the Secretary of Agriculture for a long time--perhaps dating back to Henry A. Wallace's day in that office. There is abundant evidence that the farm magazine is still a principal source of information for the farmer, and as such it should be properly recognized. The fact that the present Secretary of Agriculture has declined two invitations to address the American Agricultural Editors' Association has stirred some unfavorable comment among its members, some of whom feel that they have been snubbed. I am sure that the Secretary had good reason for his declining the invitations, and I hope that this ill-feeling will not prove detrimental to the goal that both editors and the Secretary are obviously working toward.

From time to time the Secretary of Agriculture holds press conferences in Washington. Most of the farm magazines have correspondents present, and some are in Washington frequently themselves. It might be worthwhile if steps were taken to alert editors concerning agricultural press conferences so they might arrange for coverage. It might be better still if the Secretary would occasionally hold a conference for farm magazine editors themselves. It is true that releases are made and newspaper reporters ask questions, but I have generally felt that the coverage given has been inadequate from the standpoint of the 401,000 farmers, stockmen and their families in the southwest who read the Farmer-Stockman magazine. Possibly other farm magazine editors feel somewhat the same way regard-

Mr. Paul Sanders, Editor
June 26, 1953

Page 5

ing their particular areas.

The USDA has a veritable storehouse of information, enough to solve most of the world's food problems if it could be applied on a general scale, and it has enough skilled information people to disseminate the information to people who might be induced to use it. This has not been done thoroughly. The present organization of the USDA will not permit it to be done. Such a system should be replaced with a system which will do the job. Realistically, it can not be changed overnight, but is it too much to ask the committee to bring in a report that might produce an ideal system?

If we do that job well, then it becomes the responsibility of the Secretary of Agriculture and Congress to put it into action under present authority, or under revisions that might be needed in the law to make it effective.

Yours very truly,

Ferdie Deering
Editor

FD:vm



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RICHMOND 9, VIRGINIA

June 30, 1953

Mr. Ferdie Deering, Editor
THE FARMER-STOCKMAN
Oklahoma City, Okla.

Dear Ferdie:

I appreciate very much your frank and detailed letter about our conference in Washington last week. I am getting out a letter to those editors of farm publications who have not thus far expressed their opinion on this matter. After they are all in, we should meet at a central point and draw up the farm paper viewpoint. I would not undertake this task alone.

I think your points are well taken. But we must have a starting point. I don't think we can start from a hypothetical situation and work back. I agree wholeheartedly that we should not recognize the political and bureaucratic bottlenecks now in existence. We should give a straight forward report and let the politicians and bureaucrats be responsible for failure to adopt our plan.

I was startled at the figures brought out at the meeting and the complete lack of understanding of the fundamental purpose of the Department of Agriculture. I have never seen a better demonstration of government for government's sake. Even the radio, TV and commercial propagandists were completely lost in the maze of bureaucracy. Your viewpoint from the "wide open spaces" was refreshing even in an air conditioned room!

Cordially yours,

P. D. Sanders
P. D. Sanders, Editor

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