



NORTH DAKOTA Farm Research

Bimonthly
Bulletin

Vol. 44, No. 4

January-February 1987



Guest Column

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The Carrington Research Extension Center constructed at the Carrington Irrigation Station was dedicated at a public ceremony and open house on Nov. 2, 1986. Since then it has been the site for a number of public informational meetings designed for the needs of farmers and ranchers.

The Carrington center is the first in North Dakota. It was authorized during the 1983 Legislative Assembly with passage of HB 1009. It permitted the main agricultural experiment station and/or any of its branch stations to accept gifts and grants dedicated to the construction of a facility to house research and extension staff. More specifically, the same law appropriated \$30,000 for site development for a center at the Carrington Irrigation Station. These funds were to be used for such capital improvements as access roadways, parking area, lighting and other needed services.

The center concept is new to North Dakota but it has been in place in several other states for a number of years. Area extension personnel are officed with research staff at a branch experiment station established to serve a specific area of the state. The center not only provides office space but also meeting rooms for conducting seminars, workshops and other informational activities.

The Carrington center service area has been arbitrarily identified as that within a radius of about 60 miles, or to a point mid-way between the state's four largest cities, Fargo and Grand Forks on the east and Bismarck and Minot on the west. There are nine county seats and all or part of eleven counties in the area. It encompasses approximately one-sixth of the state's area, one-tenth of its population and 6,000 farms and ranches that produce an average gross annual farm product value of \$275,000,000.

The center is 3½ miles north of Carrington on US #281. Carrington, with a population of 2800, is the county seat of Foster County and serves as its trade center as well as for parts of adjacent counties. The average farm size is 1100 acres with acreage increasing from east to west through the area. Each county in the center's service area has one or more county agents and several have an extension home economist.

A basic purpose of the center is to provide the agricultural producer on the land with the technical information available from the state university, the experiment station, the extension service and other sources that may help to make his operation a success. Today's agriculture requires a multi-disciplined technical approach which is not always available on a county level but can be accomplished on a regional basis. Thus, the center serves as an outreach of the Land Grant University by providing a focal point of information services which can serve as a "back-up" to the

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On the Cover: Extension agronomist Jim Helm speaks to a standing room only crowd attending a specialty crops workshop at the Carrington Research Extension Center. In this issue, retired Carrington Experiment Station superintendent Howard Olson explains the center concept. **Back Cover:** The newly opened Research Extension Center at Carrington. Photos by James Berg



Vol. 44, No. 4

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A BIMONTHLY progress report published
by the
**Agricultural Experiment Station,
North Dakota State University of
Agriculture and Applied Science**
Fargo, North Dakota 58105
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Dean of Agriculture, and Director
of Agricultural Experiment Station
EDITOR
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Examining declines in pastureland cash rentals from their peak values shows substantial declines in the Northeast Central, Northwest Central, and Southeast Central areas, and moderate declines in the Southwest and Southwest Central farming areas. Cash rentals peaked in the

Southwest area back in 1980 and have slowly declined since. Pastureland rentals in the Northeast Central area from 1976 to 1983 were in a range of \$11-12 per acre, then dropped to a plateau of \$10.50 for three years, and had another decline in 1986.

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cooperative extension program in the counties as well as a direct source to the individual who inquires. The location of professional staffing in the service area allows "hands on" experience which can relate directly to the producer's needs. Such experience gained by the staff specialist can provide the basis for a commonness of interest and professional trust and confidence in the technical information offered to the producer.

The center also provides a demonstration kitchen for extension home economics programs. It becomes an ideal site for conducting multi-county homemaker, 4-H club and young adult programs that may benefit a large segment of the area's population.

Currently, a number of states are reviewing the organizational structure of their extension and experiment station programs. The regional or center concept is attracting much attention as a cost effective system of transferring technological information to the producer. "Regionalization" is a term that arouses the ire of some, possibly because of traditional association with the historic county boundaries. Nevertheless, with the generally good roads and the rapid advances in electronic communication systems it must be recognized that some informational programs can be more efficiently and effectively offered on an area basis rather than in individual counties. Extension staff specialists at the university who provide many of the program offerings are limited in number and can schedule only a limited number of programs. Further, the complexities of subject matter often require a more detailed class-room type presentation than the broad-brush treatment sometimes offered because of time constraints. Thus, to make a program offering at a center serving several counties has to be recognized as a more effective means of utilizing a specialists' talents and time for the dissemination of information to a larger number of producers.

This is not to suggest the abandonment of the county extension agent's office or extension programs, but it would require some shift in program planning to take advantage of subject matter that may be best offered on an area basis. This could require county extension agents within a center area to consider area program planning as well as county programs having in mind best utilization of both extension staff specialists and research personnel from the experiment station who often participate in public informational meetings.

For those interested solely in economy of government services, it cannot be said that the center concept will save any money, but it is believed it could upgrade availability of technical information to the producers who require more training and information on the technological areas they are concerned with. Many are seeking such information, knowing it is essential to survival in a highly competitive industry. A center fully implemented as a focal point for information utilizing on-site professional staff supported with input from local county agents and the staff specialists at the University could be a very effective method of not only assisting producers to survive and prosper but also, by so doing, improve the quality of life in rural North Dakota.

The new center at the Carrington Station, a \$420,000 facility constructed solely with gifts and grants from many sources including a large number of area farmers, ranchers and businessmen, offers the opportunity to discover a new, more complete and effective system of information transfer. It would seem that every effort should be made by all concerned including the cooperative extension service, the experiment station and area producers to take advantage of such opportunity. I am confident that if this done all may discover a better way of keeping the producer on the land better informed in agricultural technology.

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