

Both Sides in Cal. Farm-Research Fight Mull Effects of 10-Year Dispute

By MARY CRYSTAL CAGE

In the wake of a decision by a California appeals court to overturn a lower court's order that the University of California revamp its agriculture-research program, both sides of the decade-old legal battle are evaluating what the fight has accomplished.

In general, the public-interest groups that brought the suit and the university agree that the political and legal pressure prompted the university to pay more attention to the needs of small farmers. The suit charged that the university, in violation of the Hatch Act, a 1887 federal statute requiring land-grant colleges to assist small farmers, designed research programs primarily to aid large agriculture businesses.

The two sides, and their allies across the country in this closely watched debate, disagree over whether more changes are needed. University officials have said that any ruling forcing them to change programs would infringe on academic freedom. The public-interest groups are weighing whether to appeal the latest decision.

Small Farm Center Set Up

Supporters of the suit take some solace in recent actions by the university. Since the suit was filed, U.C. has established a Small Farm Center, and devoted more resources to research on pesticides, the management of water for irrigation, and other issues of importance to small-farm and large industrial-farm operators.

"In a way, some of the changes

U.C. made were an acknowledgment that not enough was being done for small-farm operators," said Don Villarejo, executive director of the California Institute for Rural Studies. "Everyone should share in the benefits of research—not just growers."

Mr. Villarejo, a consultant to the farm workers and public-interest groups that sued the university system in 1979, said he was pleased with the changes in the university's agriculture-research program. But he said: "There are other areas of work that remain neglected."

Primarily, Mr. Villarejo is concerned about the poverty of California's farm workers, whose livelihoods are threatened by mechanized harvesting. That threat is why he and other members of the coalition that brought the suit are considering appealing to the state Supreme Court.

For example, 10 years after the prototype of the U.C.-Davis tomato harvester was built in 1963, 30,000 to 40,000 tomato-farm workers were unemployed, and the number of tomato growers dropped from 4,000 to 600, said William H. Friedland, acting dean of social science at the university's Santa Cruz campus.

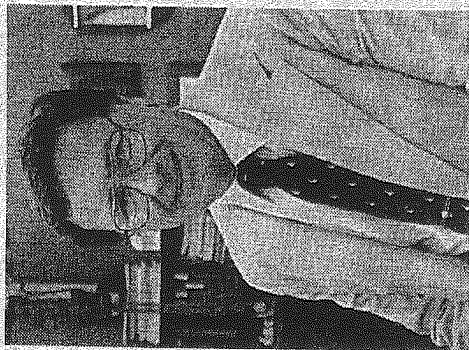
"Was that a good thing? Should the university be doing research that eliminates jobs for 3,400 growers? Is it progressive to eliminate 3,400 tomato growers? I have my doubts," said Mr. Friedland, a professor of community studies and sociology.

Since 1973, he has been urging U.C. system administrators to adopt a review process for proposed research projects that would include a social-



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impact statement. Initially, projects would be judged on scientific merit, as is done now. But eventually, Mr. Friedland said, the social-impact statement would be a factor in determining which projects should be undertaken.

Issues Prompt National Debate

That is not academic heresy, Mr. Friedland said in defense of his proposal: "The fact is, not all research gets done."

So far, the university has rejected the idea, saying it would limit academic freedom and impose unreasonable limits on the system's \$126-million agriculture-research program.

The ideas raised in the case, such as the social-impact statement, have prompted national debate.

H. Evan Drummond, interim dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Florida, predicted that such statements might have been required by the courts if the university had not won the case on appeal.

"The statements would add to the

riculture college, acknowledged that since the lawsuit was filed, the university system had shown a "much greater sensitivity to social and environmental impacts."

At the same time, Mr. Hess said, the suit was "an overstatement" and not representative of the kind of research that universities are doing today, such as studying the benefits of crop rotation, creating biodegradable plastics from corn starch, and developing high-yield crops.

Roger E. Garrett, a U.C.-Davis agricultural-engineering professor and developer of a mechanized lettuce harvester, said that research on mechanization has been a low priority in recent years because California farmers have had an adequate labor supply.

"My experience has shown me that the industry will only pick up on mechanization if there isn't an availability of hand labor," he said. "When there isn't labor to do the total job—as was the case in the tomato industry—then somebody will adopt mechanization. And if there's an economic advantage, other farmers may turn to it."

That economic advantage is often what hurts small farmers and farm workers, said Armando M. Menocal, a lawyer with Public Advocates, a public-interest group, and the trial lawyer in the suit.

James R. Whitaker, associate dean for academic affairs at U.C.-Davis's College of Agricultural and Environmental Studies, said that without mechanization, California's tomato industry would have gone to Mexico.

"It was an attempt to keep a major industry in California. If we look at the white-asparagus market, there was no machine developed to harvest that, so that crop went to Taiwan," he said.

"There is a social-impact side to this. A number of these workers weren't skilled enough to change to higher quality jobs," Mr. Whitaker continued. "The question we have to ask is, Is this the university's responsibility or is it society's responsibility?"

bureaucracy. But realistically speaking, they would have very little impact on research. Most research being conducted has a very positive social impact," Mr. Drummond said.

Mr. Drummond added that it would be inappropriate to judge research programs independently of cooperative-extension programs through which universities share the results of their research with local farmers.

Cooperative-extension programs are largely biased in favor of small farmers, he said.

Charles E. Hess, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for science and education, said the proper time to evaluate the social implications of a project is after a new technology becomes available, "since when you launch a research project, you don't know what the outcome will be." He said that those findings should be used "as an early warning," however, and not to halt work on a project.

Mr. Hess, who prior to heading the nation's agriculture-research programs was dean of the U.C.-Davis ag-