

Two years ago I was fortunate to be able to tour the Nevada Test Site north of Las Vegas. Our intended purpose was to take a look at revegetation and restoration efforts that have been ongoing there for more than 50 years. It was an amazing day. Besides the great ecological restoration work, we saw several things that were included in the now famous old military and Atomic Energy Commission films. We viewed the troop trenches where soldiers witnessed above- and belowground nuclear tests, we saw the string of houses that were demolished to varying degrees in the atmospheric explosions, and we made it to ground zero for several of the nuclear tests.

In 1962, the Storax Sedan Project, a belowground nuclear test designed to assess the practicality of using nuclear weapons for mining, was big news. It contaminated more people in the United States with nuclear fallout than any other nuclear test before or since. For those of us who remember, it was a scary time. No one knew what would become of us as the nuclear age engulfed the world. We had nuclear drills in school, fallout shelters, and movies about giant nuclear ants and shrinking men. We were all afraid at some level. But 50 years later, I was given permission to throw a rock in the Sedan crater. If you can throw a rock in it, it's not scary anymore.

Another highlight of that day was when we entered the commissary. It was like time travel. With a few notable exceptions, everything in the room appeared just as it did in the early 1950s. It had the same tile flooring, the same patterned walls, the same light fixtures, the same furniture, and the same boomerang Formica on the counters. And I kid you not, as soon as I sat down to eat lunch, Webb Pierce's "There Stands the Glass" came blaring over the music intercom, and for a brief moment I was taken back in time, and it was fun!

Actually going back in time of course is impossible. I deal with misguided environmentalists on a regular basis who want to return the West to 1491. You cannot be 12 years old again, and besides, some things are better left to the past. But that doesn't mean we can't change our current course to resemble something that may have been better in

TALES FROM THE WASTELAND

Time Travel

The demise of the agriculture experiment station.

By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.

past times. Our land-grant university and agriculture-experiment-station situation is a great example.

Over the past several decades, agriculture experiment stations have evolved under diminished funding and support. Originally land-grant universities through agriculture experiment stations were charged with conducting mission-oriented, applied research to solve problems in their home states. The formula funding for experiment stations

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included technician, travel, and faculty research budgets that would address local agricultural issues and challenges.

This began to change in the early 1970s. Stagnant base funding that was spread thinner across expanding university faculties led to more dependence on nationally competitive funding sources like the National Science Foundation (NSF), Department of Agriculture, and the National Institutes of Health for faculty tenure and promotion. The incentive structure of high-powered research universities has increased the demand for national grants while experiment station base funding has been more static. Universities have become federal-money dependent and are demanding more and more overhead from federal grant sources. In turn, university administrations have rewarded research faculty who were good at obtaining it. This process led to faculty choosing their own research directions that were heavily influenced by the priorities of the federal grant agencies rather than

local or regional priorities.

Often, as in the case of the NSF, applied agricultural and natural-resource science proposals were not only discouraged, but disparaged and even punished. Concurrent with stagnant base and capacity funding for experiment stations, the nationally competitive federal grant agencies received significant funding increases which left and leaves smaller experiment stations at a competitive disadvantage. The 2011 NSF report showed that the percentage of awards to academic institutions (by proportion of funds received) was only 16 percent for Ph.D.-granting institutions that were not in the top 100 NSF-funded category. In other words, larger faculties get a larger piece of the pie because they have more people applying for federal grants.

Over time these and other causal factors spawned the slow demise and even death in some cases of mission-oriented, applied research at land-grant universities. Range and livestock-grazing research have been hit particularly hard. I believe that this trend needs to be reversed. Applied, mission-oriented research in agriculture and natural resources that solves local and regional problems is critically important to citizens in both rural and urban areas of the West. We need to move back to a system that works

toward the original charter of land-grant universities and agriculture experiment stations. And it doesn't help when land-grant university presidents make statements like, "This is not a land-grant university; it is a liberal arts university with land-grant responsibilities."

Folks, we need to rethink our land-grant university system and who runs it, and we may have to travel back in time to find its original purpose. Like mining with nuclear weapons, our current system is neither sustainable nor practical, and it has created a huge explosion in our land-grant system. I hope someday we can throw a rock in the crater it has made. ■

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