Professor Block gave us a rather complete and interesting discussion of various aspects of farm organizations. He indicated that, in the future, farm organizations will need to give increased emphasis to international aspects of the food and fiber industry. He pointed out a number of other factors that will affect the farm organization of the future including fewer and larger farms, greater specialization, urbanized influences and legislative re-apportionment. Finally, he discussed some of the kinds of services that farm organizations provide.

Personally, I would like to have had more information on the changes in the number and types of farm organizations and services performed by farm organizations over the past 15 or 20 years. This might have been more suggestive of relevant trends in coming years. What types of farm organizations have been organized in the past 15 years to provide what services to farmers? How successful have they been? More specifically, have the increased specialization of farming, the reduced number of farmers, and the continued low prices brought about new commodity oriented farm organizations? If so, how successful have they been in achieving their more narrow and more specific goals? With a continuation of present trends in specialization, farm numbers, and margins, one must ask, At what point does bargaining by producers become feasible and by what type of farm organization?

Moreover, we have probably been far too conservative in our estimate of changes. Professor Block suggested that the development of synthetics in the future would undoubtedly affect farmers. One need not put this one over the next hill. Synthetic sour cream, ham, poultry, and other foods are on the market already. They serve primarily as alternatives for a few consumers for health or religious reasons; as yet they are not competitive in price with the real thing. Let me remind you, however, of the diet soft drink—a similar recent innovation. Within another year it is expected to make up 25 percent of soft drink sales. A pertinent question is whether farm organizations learned anything in the oleo-butter controversy which might be applicable to some of the emerging problems.

In discussing the services of farm organizations, I wish Professor Block would have gone further in suggesting which services are likely to be most critical and which types of farm organizations might reasonably be expected to provide specific services. One might hypothesize that policy development,

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representation, and market development are relatively specific aspects which a commodity interest might wish to tackle. This does not agree with Block's statement that a general farm organization might present a coordinated policy proposal or position to the government. Can a general farm organization agree to a coordinated farm policy? If not, what are the alternatives? And the consequences? Probably a producer's commodity group can present a unified policy proposal -- for its commodity. But then who determines how conflicting commodity policies get settled?

If there is a trend toward commodity organizations because of the increased specialization of farming and fewer producers, might there also be a trend toward farmers belonging to two organizations: the commodity oriented and the general? Specific policies, viewpoints, and action programs might originate from the commodity organization. Supplies, public relations, training aids, and social services might be obtained through the general organization.

Finally, are there services that farm organizations might provide that they do not now provide? For example, with larger and larger farm units it becomes rather important for farm operators to give increased emphasis to estate planning or other orderly transfer of the farm operations. Might the farm organization of the future provide a legal expert to aid in the solution of such problems at a nominal cost to the member? Might the general farm organization take over the electronic record keeping for commercial farmers? Perhaps as a next step they might then provide tax consultants as well.

Block also indicated in a footnote that there is little information available on the age patterns of farm organizations. Perhaps one of the most important needs of farm organizations is some research on their membership -- not only on age, but on their affiliation with other farm organizations, type of farming, farm problems, and what members feel they get or would like to get from membership in the organization.

Professor Holcomb reviewed the demand for farm managerial services. He indicated the kinds of jobs professional farm managers hold now, and then considered some of the changes that are likely to come about in the future. Some of the important future developments are expected to be increased specialization by professional farm managers and closer working relationships with educational specialists.

I felt it would have been helpful if, early in the paper, Professor Holcomb had indicated what type of managerial services he was referring to. I believe he was dealing with the professionally trained farm manager. While he indicated that owner-operators and tenant operators provide such services, I gathered that his concern was aimed almost completely at the remainder of professional farm managers.
Holcomb predicted that the professional farm manager will become increasingly specialized in the future. I would have liked further elaboration. Does this mean that one farm manager will specialize in crops or even in certain crops and another in livestock or in certain kinds of livestock? Or does he mean that one manager will specialize in farm records, another in budgeting and programming, and still another in legal matters? With this increased specialization do students major in crops and take a few courses in management or do they major in management and take a heavy dose of crops? Exactly what are the implications of this increased specialization for the on-campus teaching program from which our specialists would graduate? Also, it was not completely clear whether he was talking about farm management specialists or technical specialists in production areas such as agricultural engineers or crop scientists.

Holcomb indicated that farmers are typically slow to request help for specific management problems. He offered two reasons for this: lack of knowledge of the help available and inability to admit that help is needed. There are a great many other people who would offer a third explanation. That is that farmers are so used to getting free information and advice that they are not willing to pay a consulting fee and do not recognize the value of a consultant. Several Michigan bankers told me last week that it is tremendously difficult to get a farmer to visit an attorney for the purpose of estate planning -- especially if the farmer has any idea at all of the cost. Why should a farmer call a professional farm manager to solve a specific problem when he can get free information from the extension services, a specialist, or a researcher at the university?

The point was also made that extension people often may not be aware of the problems that professional farm managers face. It seems to me that one of the clear implications of all these papers is the increased difficulty that extension people and applied researchers as well will have in getting ahead and staying ahead of developments in a field. It's going to be much easier in the future for educators to find themselves behind the commercial farmer rather than in front providing leadership.

Ottoson and Timmons' stimulating paper reviewed some of the problems of rural areas with respect to social overhead services. They suggest that many rural areas do not have a desirable level of quality of such services and that the problem is likely to worsen due to outmigration. They review several possibilities for attacking the problem including transfer payments, governmental consolidation and reorganization, consolidation of services, and inter-county cooperation.

Personally, I thought their general model of social services was a desirable place to start. It helped to focus on some of the relevant aspects of providing social services. Unfortunately, there are evidently few data available to bring to bear on the problem of what constitutes an economic
population unit for purposes of providing such services.

It seems to me that we are in rather desperate need of research on economies of size with respect to the number of people within a local governmental unit (such as the county unit), the number of people served by a school district, the number needed to support a hospital, etc. Economists have many of the tools for making such studies, and it seems high time they started to do some research on these questions. One of the specific needs is for some research on a theory of investment applied to a business or industry with declining markets. This would be applicable to rural, small town businesses. When these towns developed originally, there was a move away from the general store toward specialization in clothing, groceries, hardware, feed, etc. With a declining market, does the process reverse itself? How does one analyze how much investment is justified in remodeling or diversifying to adjust to a decreasing market?

When Ottoson and Timmons indicated that the average U.S. county had 38 governmental units, I wish they had defined exactly what they mean by a governmental unit. Also, it would be interesting to know how many of these governmental units were local, or state, or federal. Further information would help in visualizing possibilities for combining two or more functions together.

They also made a strong case for school consolidation although they failed to mention whether the consolidation would result in better quality of instruction or in efficiencies. Presumably they were arguing quality since they later suggested that farmers were often unwilling to support consolidation because it would result in substantial increases in property taxes.

The paper made an interesting case for decreasing costs of local government with increases in county population. There is little question but that some counties may be too sparsely populated to keep local government costs down. However, one should not push this too far. There are a few counties in Michigan and probably in many Midwest states where taxes are very high because population is too thin. However, some of the lower tax rates are achieved by rural Michigan counties whereas Wayne County (Detroit) has one of the highest taxes for county government in the state. Also there is another question of importance here. If taxes are based on property holdings and if few people hold large properties in a sparsely populated area, then naturally the tax per capita or costs of local government per capita will be higher. But little evidence was presented on the resulting quality of local government. Perhaps large property holders need more government services in the form of roads, police protection, fire protection, etc., than more populated counties. Should government costs tend to be equal per capita across a state or should costs be in line with benefits received?
Ottoson and Timmons at one point indicated that they expect income disparities between rural and urban people to narrow. If rural communities continue to diminish in size from outmigration and if it is increasingly true that those who are left are the older members of the community with investments in homes and businesses which will be difficult to salvage, then I fail to see this narrowing of the income gap. The income gap does not narrow because rural and urban people watch the same TV commercials; rather it becomes narrower through mobility and comparable marketable skills.

Also it seems to me their paper did not focus sufficiently on the governmental level at which pressure should be brought to bear and at which decisions are made. If consolidation of counties is to take place, the decision will be made at the state level since counties, as our authors said, are a creature of the state. On the other hand, school consolidation is a local issue and pertinent information on benefits and costs of consolidation should be made available at the local level.

In a city-county type of consolidation, members of each governmental unit have a legitimate concern as to how their interests will be affected. Will the city inhabitant, if he controls the consolidated unit, have respect for minority needs (that is, the farmers' needs) or vice versa?

From a political standpoint, in many states the county unit of government is the basic building block for our political party structure. If we were to go so far as to suggest that counties as a governmental unit be abolished, this recommendation carries some fairly serious implications for our political party organization. It might be useful to ask what would replace the county party organization in the political system.

Finally, I simply disagree with a couple of thoughts presented in the paper. I'm not convinced that a chief executive of county government with an appointed cabinet of county officers would bring about efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness of government. In fact, I suspect that an elected county officer who can be voted out of office at the next election tends to be more responsive than an appointive officer. Similarly, I fail to see how the establishment of a chief executive in itself can lead, or would lead, to centralized purchasing and other administrative efficiencies -- especially considering the implied salary increase that would be required in line with the administrator's executive abilities. Perhaps a useful alternative would be to force county elected officials to obtain professional training and instruction in administration by the state or by their own state wide organization, if they have such. In other words, why not train local people who have the community and local experience to be better administrators rather than hire professional administrators and expect them to get the necessary feel for the community and its problems?
Neither am I convinced that the answer to these social overhead problems should at least at this time, come from a national policy. Rural people want their children to be well-educated. They want adequate medical services. They want successful local business. If researchers can provide information on what is needed to achieve these goals and on the alternative means for achieving them, I have no doubt that rural people can and will make the necessary decisions. Perhaps national and state policy can help them achieve whatever goals they choose, but our function at this time is to point out the problems, provide information, and help evaluate alternatives.

In summary, each of these papers had many interesting and useful things to contribute. I only wish that each of them could have gone further in revealing the future. Perhaps that is asking too much. Maybe we'll simply have to wait and see what further implications will be.