

The impact of agricultural information on members of parliament.

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Summary. Members of Parliament (MPs) can exert considerable influence on government policy. Attitudes of Queensland MPs to available agricultural information were sought so that representatives of rural industry might more effectively present their problems and concerns. Members from rural areas are more active seekers of agricultural information than urban members, but both groups reported that the availability of this information was unsatisfactory. The position of agriculture in Australia could be enhanced by providing MPs with information that is both factual and readily useable (i.e. clear and concise).

Introduction

Concern has been expressed that rural industry and agricultural science suffer because few Australian policy-makers ('influentials') are interested in agriculture (1). Ina11 suggested that a program to communicate positive information about agriculture should be targeted to school students and key journalists (1). However Lloyd and Harris (2) point out that while governments are a major source of funds for agriculture, particularly research, they are unlikely to increase funding of their own volition because the political benefits are small. Politicians would therefore be appropriate targets for information campaigns, but as in all cases it is beneficial to know something about those being targeted (3).

This paper presents some background information on the attitudes to agriculture of members of the Queensland Parliament. Queensland has a single parliamentary chamber, the Legislative Assembly, currently with 89 members (MLAs). The Parliamentary Library provides a range of research and reference services, including meeting specific requests for information from individual MLAs. This paper presents two sources of data: an analysis of requests made to the Library on agricultural subjects, and responses to a questionnaire which sought members' views on agricultural information.

Methods

Analysis of Requests

All requests by MLAs that require longer than 10 minutes to fulfil are entered into a requests database. The information recorded for each request includes the date, title, member, and a single subject code selected from 84 possible codes, one of which is 'agriculture'. A listing of requests coded 'agriculture' between 1 January 1990 and 30 June 1991 was obtained and these were itemised by source (member) and the topic of the request as indicated by the title. Some requests covered more than one topic. Members (i.e. electorates) were classified either as urban (>80% of constituents living in urban centres of 10,000 people or more) or rural.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was sent to all members' electorate offices in July 1991. Questions covered sources and quality of agricultural information. Most answers required the choice of one of five categories: very low, low, average, high and very high. The questionnaire was anonymous and information on political affiliation was not requested. The questionnaire was returned by 54 members (60.7%).

Results and discussion

The Parliamentary Library received 4,777 information requests during the 18 month period, and 123 of these (2.57%) were coded as 'agriculture'. Of these, 115 were from members, with the remainder primarily from government departments and other libraries. In all, 42 members (47% of members) made

at least one request for agricultural information (Table 1). Most requests were from members in rural electorates.

Table 1. Requests by Queensland MLAs for information on agricultural subjects 1.1.90 - 30.6.91 - summary of requests.

	Total Members	Members Requesting Information		Requests	
		Number	Percentage of Group	Number	Percentage of Total
Urban	46	14	30	28	24
Rural	43	28	65	87	76
TOTAL	89	42	47	115	100

Table 2. Requests by Queensland MLAs for information on agricultural subjects 1.1.90 - 30.6.91 - summary of topics requested.

Topic	Number of Requests
Costs and Incomes, Marketing, Trade	42
Legislation, Policies, Regulation	31
Specific Animal Industries	33
Specific Plant Industries	30
Land Management, Irrigation	10
Pests and Pesticides	5
Agricultural Research	3
TOTAL	154

The requests covered a wide range of topics, which are summarized in table 2. The topics could be collated in three main groups - those dealing with a specific agricultural industry, those dealing with costs and returns, marketing and trade, and those dealing with legislation, regulation and rural policies. Only three requests for information (out of 4777!) were concerned with agricultural research.

Questionnaires were returned by 24 urban and 30 rural members (52% and 70% of the respective groups). Table 3 presents the stated use levels of various sources of agricultural information. Urban members clearly are not active seekers of agricultural information as a majority reported low or very low use of all sources questioned except radio and TV. By comparison, radio and TV, rural press and personal contacts were reported as highly or very highly used by a majority of rural members. Information supplied by interest groups may also be an effective means of communication to rural members.

Table 3. Urban and rural members' estimates of their use of various sources of agricultural information (as percentage of responses in each group).

Information source	Urban			Rural		
	Low or V. Low	Average	High or V. High	Low or V. Low	Average	High or V. High
Radio & TV	39	13	48	10	38	52
Metro press	52	30	17	56	20	24
Rural press	52	26	22	21	14	65
Technical Publications	82	5	14	43	29	28
Personal-contacts	57	14	29	7	24	69
Pressure/Interest-groups	67	19	14	24	48	28

Members were asked to rate the availability and quality of agricultural information available to them compared with that on a range of other topics. Unfortunately a majority of members considered that agricultural information was less available than that for four of the five other topics indicated, the exception being medicine (Table 4). Members' perceptions of the quality of agricultural information were higher than those of its availability.

When members were asked to comment on eight specific current issues, again only a minority of members considered information to be highly available (Table 5). This is despite the fact that six of the issues were considered highly important by a large majority of members.

Table 4. Percentages of members who perceived the availability and quality of agricultural information to be less than, the same, or more than, that of other topics.

Topic	Availability of agricultural information			Quality of agricultural information		
	Less	Same	More	Less	Same	More
Environment	65	24	10	43	32	25
Education	52	32	16	40	47	13
Social Issues	56	20	24	32	34	34
Economics	60	24	16	40	45	15
Medicine	22	31	47	13	48	39

Table 5. Members' perceptions of the importance of, and availability of information for, several agricultural issues. Data are the percentages of members who considered the importance of the issue, or the availability of information, to be high or very high.

Issue	Importance	Availability of information
Soil erosion	85	41
Improved management of agric. chemicals	81	35
Value-added processing	81	12
Marketing	74	25
Food imports	72	18
Increased agric. research	68	22
Elimination of agric. chemicals	42	15
Stricter government regulation of agric.	30	12

Members of parliament receive large volumes of information on a range of current community issues. They appear to be well aware of important issues in agriculture yet are dissatisfied with the information available to them. This suggests either that information does not reach their desks, or that it comes in a form that is not readily useable. In the latter case, possible problems are excessive bulk, poor substantiation, or unclear arguments. In the light of this, Inall's (1) suggestion of targeting key journalists may be a good one, but also key rural groups should prepare, directly for members, position papers that are factual and concise but also interesting.

References

1. Mall, N. 1990 Agric. Sci. New Series 3, 16.
2. Lloyd, A. and Harris, M. 1990 Agric. Sci. New Series 3, 36-39.
3. Sage, C. 1990 Agric. Sci. New Series 3, 20-21.