

INFORMATION CENTERS AT NAL

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Information Centers first appeared at the National Agricultural Library (NAL) in 1971 when the Food and Nutrition Service of USDA transferred funds to NAL to establish the Food and Nutrition Information Center. To date, there are 12 specialized information centers designed to focus on areas of great interest to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Congress, and the public.

Current centers focus on agricultural trade and marketing; alternative farming systems (low-input agriculture, organic farming, alternative crops); animal welfare (focuses on six species of animals used in biomedical research); aquaculture; biotechnology; critical agricultural materials (new crops or new uses for old crops that can produce vital industrial materials such as oils, paper and rubber where the U.S. currently depends on imports); family; fiber and textiles; food and nutrition, food irradiation; horticulture; and rural development.

The 1982 Assessment of the National Agricultural Library--Final Report to the Secretary cited the need for NAL to provide in-depth coverage of specific topics such as that done by the Food and Nutrition Information Center. Information centers build on what NAL already does as well as provide enhanced services to current clientele and develop new service relationships with the public and private sectors.

Factors affecting the determination of subjects covered by information centers include: (1) Congressional mandate (i.e. FNIC; Aquaculture; Animal Welfare); (2) priorities within USDA (i.e. Agricultural Trade and Marketing; Biotechnology); (3) availability of subject expertise on the NAL staff (i.e. Fiber and Textiles; Food Irradiation; and (4) financial support and interest by business and professional organizations in agriculture and related fields (i.e. horticulture). Several of the centers were established by more than one of the above factors.

A distinctive characteristic of an information center is that it takes a proactive approach to identifying and developing cooperative external relationships and establishing dissemination networks.

Information Center staff are responsible for seven major activities: (1) Reference; (2) Collection development; (3) Publications; (4) Coordination; (5) Outreach; (6) Dissemination; and, (7) New technology. Reference work includes answering specific questions, performing literature or other database searches, and referring persons to other organizations or individuals. Each Center has a budget for acquiring books and other monographic materials for the NAL collection and the AGRICOLA database. Center staff are responsible for producing bibliographies, special reference briefs, and other information products focusing on their area of expertise. A few centers have established their own series (i.e. Aquatopics; FNIC Pathfinders, etc). Communication and coordination within USDA and with other public and private organizations is a high priority for each Center.

Outreach activities are characterized by exhibits, speeches and demonstrations related to the Center. Dissemination networks are established through the public and private sector. For example, FNIC has several different dissemination systems including state representatives of the American School Food Service Association, State nutrition educators for the Supplemental Feeding Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), State Coordinators of the Nutrition Education and Training Program, and state school nurse liaisons.

Whenever possible, Center staff explore the utilization of new information technology in providing information in their subject area. Two prototype expert advisory systems have been developed on aquaculture and human nutrition. Selected aquaculture materials will be the first to be put onto CD-ROM in NAL's text digitizing project. All centers are expected to be active participants in NAL's new electronic bulletin board. In addition, FNIC serves as a national demonstration center for food and nutrition microcomputer software.

Information centers are staffed by technical information specialists or librarians with appropriate subject matter background. For example, FNIC is staffed by Registered Dietitians who have a Masters degree in either nutrition or public health. Center staff need to be creative individuals who can identify

new ways to do things. They must be flexible and open to new ideas or approaches. Good management skills are essential.

The newest information center at NAL is the Rural Information Center (RIC). This center has its roots in the 1981 amendments to the 1972 Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C. 2661 et seq). This legislation states that the Secretary of Agriculture has responsibility for rural development activities in America.

In 1984, the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) established a task force and study group to look into the feasibility of establishing a National Advisory Board on Rural Information Needs (NABRIN). NABRIN was envisioned by NCLIS to focus on providing better library and information services to local governments, community institutions and businesses, and the individual citizen in rural areas. The NABRIN Task Force and Study Group recommended that a National Advisory Board on Rural Information Needs be established within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Unfortunately this recommendation came at a time when the Office of Management and Budget did not look favorably at the establishment of new advisory boards so no further action was taken.

Within USDA, however, it was determined that NAL would have the responsibility for providing information services to rural America. At the time it was proposed that NAL and Extension jointly fund a position to carry out this mandate. Unfortunately funding was not provided to either agency to support this information activity likewise resulting in no further action.

The issue of NAL providing information services to Rural America surfaced again in 1987 when the Congress asked the Department to come up with a plan to address the needs of rural populations. Deputy Secretary Peter Myers announced USDA's 6-point Rural Regeneration Initiative to Congress. One of the 6 steps included the establishment of an information clearinghouse at NAL with a 800 telephone number. NAL would provide up-to-date information to rural community officials about federal programs available to them.

RIC came into being shortly after the Deputy Secretary made this announcement. NAL began planning how they would staff and operate an 800 "hotline." Once Extension heard of our charge, they said that they wanted to

be involved. This resulted in a joint cooperative effort that distinguishes RIC from other information centers.

It was quickly agreed that RIC would not have an 800 "hotline." Instead local officials would be directed to their local extension office to gain access to RIC. Local extension would work closely with the State Extension office before contacting RIC. Thus, RIC would be closely tied into the Extension network.

Under RIC, NAL would be responsible for the staffing, daily operation, collection development, and publications of the Center. Extension would provide the research linkages, extension network, and technical expertise.

Funding and staffing for RIC in FY 1987 and 1988 were jointly provided by Extension and NAL. A proposal for funding RIC is included in the FY 1989 budget. Once the funding is approved, Extension will no longer provide additional monetary support directly to RIC but they will continue to be involved in planning, policy, and coordination activities.

In addition to working closely with Extension, RIC has initiated several other new partnerships. NAL has begun working with the Center for Rural Librarianship of Clarion University of Pennsylvania. One example of this new relationship is that NAL is cosponsoring this conference. NAL is also providing intern opportunities for Clarion graduate library students.

Another important NAL initiative involves working with the Rural Library Services Committee, Small and Medium Sized Libraries Section, Public Library Association, American Library Association. Pat John, RIC Coordinator, will be giving a presentation on RIC at their annual meeting in July. Several meetings have been held with various representatives of this organization to explore ways in which RIC should tie into the public library network. It has been suggested that the state librarians be the primary initial contact. NAL looks forward to serving as a backup resource for rural libraries on issues such as rural economic development.

Historically there have been turf problems between Extension and libraries at all levels--federal, state, and local on providing information to the public. Unfortunately, many of the issues reflect a basic misunderstanding of the roles each institution plays.

In actuality librarians and extension personnel have special expertise that compliments one another. While librarians are experts at being able to identify

and provide published information regardless of format, extension personnel have the expertise to take that information and apply its findings in solving specific problems. Both of these organizations prefer to utilize their networks at the local, state, and finally national levels.

Training is needed for both librarians and extension personnel to communicate the need for cooperative relationships especially in rural areas. There are a few success stories such as the Intermountain Community Learning and Information Services project funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The Rural Library Services Committee is interested in working with NAL on writing a grant proposal for developing a training program that would foster more widespread cooperation.

For more detailed information on RIC, I will turn the program over to Pat John, RIC Coordinator.