

An Effective National Voice for Food and Agriculture Science

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INTRODUCTION

America's bountiful supply of quality food and fiber products is the result of our country's abundant natural resources, carefully managed by generations of farmers, ranchers, and growers. Agriculture—a science-based industry—has been the backbone of our economic and social development. These achievements are admired, even envied, by peoples around the world.

Our nation has the world's finest food and agricultural research network. It is a harmonious blend of the public and private sectors, incorporating more than 50,000 scientists. Some evidence of their achievements: (1) The average U.S. farmer produces 375,000 pounds of raw food annually, 12 times that of a Russian farmer. (2) The average U.S. farm worker feeds 68 persons, 48 in this country and 20 by exports. American agricultural scientists are respected and honored for their contributions.

As agriculturists have become increasingly productive, they have been challenged by demands for more and more of their products. At the same time, society's honest but frequently unfounded concerns about the application of modern technology have limited agriculture's ability to meet these demands.

Science has become a fundamental element of public policy issues. The past quarter century has been a time of rapid scientific and technological advance. One result is a new set of government agencies with broad authority over the environment and how people live. To many of the nation's researchers, those new agencies often seemed unable to comprehend how science and technology should be incorporated into the making of public policy—such as in food and agricultural issues.

Our scientific system is one of America's strengths. It is effective—among other reasons—because of the credibility of the peer review system, and of the wide sharing of new knowledge through publication. If there is a weakness in the process, it may be that the hundreds of research journals are edited for scientists communicating with other scientists. This tends to obscure scientific knowledge from the public eye, making it difficult for those outside the scientific community to quickly obtain the new research and put it to use.

Editors Note: The Aquatic Plant Management Society, Inc., became a member Scientific Society of CAST in 1979. A portion of APMS membership dues is paid to CAST to sustain our CAST Society membership. The society is represented at CAST Board of Directors meetings and members have served on several important task forces.

The increase in "public participation" which characterized the 1970s reached into the scientific community, too. Scientists became aware that many of the new laws and regulations being enacted were not justified by—truly, were often contrary to—the known scientific facts. They perceived a new need to disseminate research beyond the pages of their journals.

Acting through their scientific societies, food and agricultural scientists voluntarily took the initiative to raise the standard of research information available to national decision-makers—Congressmen, their staff assistants, and regulatory officials. Many of the nation's top scientists have contributed their time and expertise, and thus helped to improve the quality of governmental decision-making.

CAST IS A SERVICE OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL SCIENTISTS

The Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) is the organization chartered in May 1972 to operate this activity. This innovative consortium of scientists and technologists is governed by the representatives of the 25 member scientific societies and of CAST's individual members. It is a public foundation as provided by Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

CAST's purpose is to advance the understanding and use of food and agricultural science and technology in the public interest, by—

- Serving as a resource from which the public and government may seek scientific information on current food and agricultural issues, and
- Independently identifying critical national issues on which food and agricultural scientists can provide information.
- Organizing multidisciplinary task forces to assemble and interpret the research information on those issues.
- Disseminating the information in usable and effective forms to appropriate target audiences, usually the government, the news media, and the general public.

In nine years of operation nearly \$2 million has been mobilized and prudently expended to conduct this scientific public service. The initial funds each year are provided by the scientific societies. Nearly 4,000 individual members underwrite CAST, too. The majority of the support comes as annual memberships (unrestricted as to their use) from over 400 agribusiness organizations—companies, cooperatives,

foundations and associations across America—who have no voice in how these monies are spent. CAST is a scientific organization; it is owned and operated solely by scientists.

Well over 1/3 of the current annual budget of nearly \$400,000 is designated for communications, which includes preparing task force reports, and publishing and distributing of publications. About 12% of the funds are expended for the work of the Board of Directors in governing CAST. The remaining half of the budget is to administer the Board's directives, to manage the task force process, for membership recruitment and maintenance, and other support services. A minimal Headquarters Office staff of 6 persons (2 professionals and 4 support personnel) carries out these duties.

The value of CAST's financial support is greatly enhanced by the voluntary services of scientists and other experts on the task forces. They receive no honorarium, only the repayment for travel and related expenses when requested. Their services are made available by their employers—universities, the government, and private industry. The ability to tap this great reservoir of scientific talent is significant leverage in raising the dollars needed to carry out the basic program.

CAST brings the best minds of the relevant scientific disciplines together to share their knowledge on those critical issues affecting food and agriculture. The process begins with the Board of Directors identifying those topics meriting attention. Task forces are then formed. Each produces a summary of the current research knowledge, written in nonscientific language. These reports are issued in time to be useful to their respective target audiences in the governmental policy development process. The task force—not CAST's Board—has full responsibility for its document. These scientists do not make recommendations on possible legislation or regulatory actions, for CAST is not a lobby.

The Board authorizes a task force to study a "critical issue" that meets these specifications:

- The topic concerns information about food and agricultural science that is needed by decision-makers who are outside the food and agricultural science community.
- The topic is of broad national concern.

- The topic will benefit from a multidisciplinary approach.
- The topic is of broad perspective, not concerned with specific products.
- The topic is educational rather than administrative.

A precise focus is maintained on how CAST operates. The multidisciplinary task force is central to the scientific input; decision-makers and opinion leaders are the primary target audiences; and printed documents are the standard format for communicating the output. But there are alternatives.

CAST has conducted six national Telephone Dialogues to put consumers and students in direct contact with scientists so they may receive accurate answers to their questions about food—its production, quality, and safety.

Task force scientists are invited to supplement the information in CAST reports by presenting expert testimony at hearings of the Congress, the regulatory agencies, and the state legislatures. CAST publishes their statements so the information will be widely available.

Working with several dozen scientific societies, CAST has produced two editions of the *Directory of Environmental Scientists in Agriculture* as a ready reference for governmental officials and news media representatives. CAST responds to innumerable telephone and letter requests from these same target audiences for contacts with scientists who can answer specific questions.

CAST services are provided without cost to the target audiences and the public. Publications are available from the Headquarters Office and copies are free to CAST members, however a modest charge is made on orders to others. The CAST objective is to encourage the dissemination of accurate, credible information in usable and effective forms.

CAST is an open organization. The list of members (financial supporters) is published annually and distributed widely, along with the current financial statement. Regular reports are published in *NEWS from CAST*, the bimonthly bulletin, to keep members and others informed of CAST achievements, criticisms, and future opportunities.

May 1982 marked CAST's tenth anniversary as a legally constituted organization. Its record of achievement is a tribute to the founders and to all food and agricultural scientists who give it their support.