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Recommended Citation
Department of Agriculture, Western Australia (1962) "A new economics research centre. John Thomson Agricultural Economics Centre at the Institute of Agriculture, University of Western Australia," Journal of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, Series 4: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 9.
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A NEW ECONOMICS RESEARCH CENTRE

A NEW research unit has been established at the University of Western Australia’s Institute of Agriculture to study the economic aspects of agricultural problems in Western Australia.

It is the John Thomson Agricultural Economics Centre, which will be developed as a problem-solving research unit in agriculture and economics.

The Centre is named after the late John Thomson, C.B.E., a leader of the co-operative movement in Western Australia, and a man who devoted much of his life to the interests of farmers in this State. He played an important part in the establishment of the Centre.

The new research unit was opened late in 1961. It is financed by donations from about 20 private companies, banks and farmers’ organisations. It aims to carry out independent University-level research in agricultural economics, and is the first research unit of its kind in Australia.

Problems to be investigated at the John Thomson Agricultural Research Centre will be set by the Committee of Management, acting on suggestions from the Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee is made up of one representative of each of the financial supporters, one nominee of the Director of Agriculture, one of the Under Secretary of the State Treasury, and three representatives of the University of Western Australia.

Specialised Training

The Centre will be staffed by several highly qualified research economists, but financial supporters and other interested bodies will be invited to second staff to the Centre while the research workers are engaged on problems of particular interest to these organisations. In this way, the Centre could add to its research personnel, and at the same time provide additional specialised training for the qualified staffs of interested firms and Government departments.

Once a problem for research has been decided upon the research economists will have complete independence in the conduct of the project. On completion of each project a report will be published in the appropriate journal or in a special bulletin, and issued automatically to each contributor.

It is worth noting that the qualifications of agricultural economists are not confined to theoretical economics, but include basic training in agricultural science and an understanding of the technical and social developments in agriculture. Their work at the new centre should therefore be of direct value to the farmers of Western Australia.

The Centre’s Executive Officer, Dr. H. P. Schapper (who is Reader in Agricultural Economics at the Institute of Agriculture) describes the work to be carried out as “the sort of problem-solving research which all policy makers would like to have carried out in advance, before they make final decisions on agricultural policy.

“Too often decisions—whether they are made by individual farmers, or by State Cabinet itself—must be made with limited economic background behind them. The Centre aims to provide this background wherever possible,” he says.

Projects

Examples of the sort of projects likely to be dealt with are:

- Short and long-term credit needs of newly-developing agricultural regions.
- Comparison of benefits and costs of different possible avenues of Government expenditure in agriculture, and in agriculture as against secondary industry.
- Best uses of individual farm resources.
- Assessment of the potential economic success of proposed crops not now grown in particular districts, or in the State as a whole.