Letters to the Editor

feedback

Editor:

Thank you for publishing our work on beef markets in the Third Quarter, 2001 issue of *CHOICES* magazine. We find two serious errors in the published article that were not in the earlier drafts. These errors will be misleading to uninformed readers.

The graph that opens the article (page 30) compares the historic prices obtained by four exporters, the U.S., Australia, Argentina, and Uruguay. The title of this chart in our manuscript was, "Average price of fresh beef exports for major world exporters, U.S.$FOB/ton (in 2000 constant dollars using U.S. PPI)." The published chart shows the title as, "Beef Exports, selected countries. 1980-1999." This title is misleading because the chart shows prices; not quantities exported. The prices shown on the vertical axis are expressed in dollars (F.O.B. price) per ton of fresh beef.

Further, the note placed next to the chart will lead to even more confusion. It says, "Argentina and Uruguay are fast becoming powers in the beef export market, with Argentina often exporting more beef than the U.S. in several recent years." The statement is inaccurate. Argentina last exported more beef than the U.S. in 1983, nearly two decades ago.

Sincerely,

Lovell (Tu) Jarvis, José E. Bervejillo, Javier Ekboir,
Daniel A. Sumner, William Sutton

CHOICES apologizes for the errors and any misinterpretations or misunderstandings that they may have caused. — PWB

Editor:

Ken Tefertiller's article, "Environmental Racism and Jobs: Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit," (Q3) is thought provoking and filled with policy questions that developmental economists and environmental groups should be debating. The author's use of indifference curves to analyze these trade-offs is intriguing. The analysis illustrates one possible case but not all situations and therefore may lead to inappropriate conclusions. A poor person's indifference map may be arranged so that ... the preferred point of consumer equilibrium is ... where the quantity of preferred environmental services is greater than those preferred by the rich person.

However, every individual, rich and poor, can be said to have an indifference or preference map which is identical to that person's welfare map. As Tefertiller asserts, all budgets situated on the same indifference curve for that individual are equivalent; all budgets lying on a higher indifference curve are preferred. A rich individual ... can consume a greater quantity of environmental services and all other goods than the poor person.

This is precisely where Tefertiller's illustration breaks down. He has made a transition from individual to group welfare in his indifference maps, where he conveniently groups relatively high-income consumers into a single indifference curve and all relatively low-income consumers into another lower indifference curve.... He reaches his appealing conclusion by constructing social welfare functions — functions that he labels "indifference curves." The problem is, he assumes every poor person has an identical preference map to that of every rich person.

He does, however, illustrate in a very real way the potential unintended side effects of policy changes that are shaped by those who presume to be acting on behalf of the common good. As Dan Bromley so aptly states, "economists can make a contribution by the questions asked rather than the answers provided." The question posed in the Tefertiller article — "who really pays environmental program costs?" — is an appropriate question for economists to pursue using economic theory and empirical methods.

Sincerely,

Roger J. Beck, Professor
Southern Illinois University

Editor:

CHOICES is often far more lively, controversial, and interesting than I would have suspected. Thanks for including me on the mailing list.

As an organic farmer for the past 14 years, with 24 years of business and military management experience prior to that, it continues to amaze me how academia typically has treated organic ag as a form of leprosy — something to ignore or occasionally abuse, but rarely to observe in a scientific spirit of inquiry. Happily, that has changed just a bit in the last few years.

One of the central myths about organic ag surfaced again in Dr. [Luther] Tweeten's letter to the editor in the third quarter 2001 issue — that is, that organic production is inherently less productive than high-input ag. ...[T]hat simply is not true: many farmers around this country have been reporting consistent organic results at or ahead of county averages since the '80s.

...[M]ost recently, Dr. Bill Liebhardt of the University of California at Davis, in the Summer 2001 issue of the Organic Farming Research Foundation's *Information Bulletin*...summarized that, "for a total of 154 growing seasons for different crops, grown in different parts of the US on both rain- fed and irrigated land, organic production yielded 95% of crops grown under conventional high-input conditions." That was across the board. There were crops and long term organic farms that did 100% or better than the average, suggesting that the longer one farms organically, the better the results.... [T]here is much anecdotal evidence to support such a conclusion. I believe the full text of this article...is still on the Research Foundation's website, www.ofrf.org. Organic methods are well worth academia's interest: not only are they productive, but they help in many ways successfully to put the farmer back in charge of his destiny.

Sincerely,
Bob Gregson
Island Meadow Farm, Vashon Island, WA
Member, King County Ag Commission