LET'S GET CLOSER TO THE FARMER

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In order to form a background for the plea embodied in the subject of this paper a brief description of conditions existing in a certain area, where the speaker has been working in close contact with farmers during the past sixteen months, will be given.

In the area referred to there are about four hundred farmers. Approximately two-thirds of them are tenants. A majority of these tenants operate on a share-cropping arrangement whereby the land owners furnish land—sometimes stumped, but more often not—fencing, seed, fertilizer and only fair to miserable living quarters; while the tenants supply draft animals and labor. At the end of the harvest season the amounts of cash coming to the tenants for their half of the crops, after all living expenses, advances, etc., have been met, are generally very small or practically non-existent. Dissatisfaction with their lot naturally arises, with consequent migrations from one farm to another where there may seem to be better prospects; or some quit farming altogether and seek other kinds of work, particularly in war industries. In addition to tenants many owners of small farms find themselves unable to make ends meet, and they too give up farming. This all contributes to the shortage of farm labor and the ever-growing certainty of a future food shortage in this nation as a whole. The problem is intensified by the fact that, under the conditions described, the most intelligent farmers are the most likely to quit and take up industrial work.

One very important cause of these farm failures is the presence of hordes of devastating insects attacking crops and gardens. Cotton boll weevils, plant bugs, Mexican bean beetles, blister beetles, Colorado potato beetles, army worms and many others

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take their heavy toll. While in this particular area the white-fringed beetles play havoc with crops on some of the farms, over the same district as a whole the common plant bugs alone probably do more actual damage than the much more publicised insects. Plant bugs not only attack a wide variety of growing plants and fruits, but even enter peanut stacks in the field and suck juices from the nuts while they are curing, thus reducing the oil content. Graders at warehouses have stated that many tons of peanuts have been so reduced in grade by the work of these pilfering fifth columnists that the farmers have suffered very severe losses. So has the nation. The cotton boll weevil has been present for many years, but their toll has been taken largely unhindered by any systematic attempts to administer poisons: and the result is a very low average production per acre. Snap beans and butter beans are in many instances wiped out by Mexican bean beetles, while the Colorado potato beetles play havoc with Irish potatoes: and the pumpkin bugs join the last two, and many others, in completing the wreck of many vegetables in the home gardens so badly needed to supplement the diet of families who, at best, do not enjoy a very high standard of living.

A large number of the farmers lack the knowledge and education to take full advantage of the present facilities available for their assistance. Many of them read no newspapers or farm journals. County agents are so swamped with problems piled upon them by various governmental agencies during the last decade, that any great number of personal contacts with the farmers in their fields has become almost impossible. Some excellent bulletins have been published by state and Federal departments, but surprisingly few of them reach the hands of those needing them; and even when they do many of the farmers cannot understand them. If one finally digs out the information as to the material to be used for a certain pest on a particular host plant, he will often fail to find the article for sale in his locality. The manufacturers of insecticides add further confusion by putting too much emphasis on pet trade names rather than making clear just what the contents of the packages really are. It is true that most states require the analyses of contents to be printed on the labels, but the type is usually very small and the names of the ingredients are often not understood by the purchasers or by the clerks making the sales. Frequently prepared insecticides are combinations of two or more substances; and when only one is
actually needed the others dilute the material wanted and add to the cost.

While the conditions mentioned have been observed over a strictly limited area in this state, no doubt they will apply in a general way to a considerable part of Florida, as well as to large portions of neighboring states.

It seems to the speaker that the problems of general farmers have not received as much attention from entomologists as has been given to those of others engaged in more specialized forms of agriculture. This is due in part, no doubt, to the fact that the former are largely unorganized, and do not have any pressure groups to lobby in legislative halls, or to drum up sentiment in their behalf. It is high time that they be taken into consideration and be given some help, even though they may be too inarticulate to ask for it.

The question naturally arises as to what can be done about these conditions. In order to answer this question someone, to use an inelegant but expressive phrase, will have to “stick his neck out” and make a few suggestions, even though they may be shot to pieces before they can be carried out; so the speaker will now place himself in that position.

First: The information that is now available should be printed in simple language in a number of small bulletins. Each bulletin should be confined to one insect only, with drawings or even colored pictures, if possible, describing the insect so that the farmer can identify it in its different stages. All drawings or pictures should be actual life size. Hosts of this particular pest should be listed, and the materials to be used in its control should be placed in a parallel column, making it plain as to which product should be used on different host plants to avoid injurious effects. The bulletins should be placed in the hands of every farmer needing them regardless of lack of any requests for the same. This is war, and information must be liberally disseminated to get the best results. Mailing lists of nearly all farmers are available in the offices of the county agents, and they should be used. The expenses of printing and distribution could be met by federal and state agencies combining in a concerted effort. Is there any reason why commercial firms could not apply a part of their advertising funds in an effort to get such information into the hands of their customers, prospects and dealers?

Second: Manufacturers should simplify labels and apply more emphasis on the contents of packages than on fanciful trade
names. They should also change some products in the same way that simplification of bulletins has been suggested, by putting only one material in each package, instead of trying to make up "shot gun" mixtures that often miss the mark and are too expensive.

Third: Every entomologist that can find spare time from his regular duties should drop all side issues or hobbies and take up one or more of these common pests to see what he can do toward better control. For the duration of the war at least all regular work on insects that may not be considered of economic importance should be dropped entirely, even though such work may be of great value for scientific purposes of a general nature. This is time for specific and immediate results, and research of a general or merely interesting kind should be suspended until peace is restored. The pumpkin bug alone offers a challenge to every student of entomology. No practical method of control of this insect on general crops has yet been developed. In view of the number of years during which this insect has been recognized as destructive, is it not somewhat of a reflection upon all entomologists that more progress toward its control has not been made? If a dozen or more should go after this single pest something definite might be accomplished. It is a common enemy. No fear of losing credit by exchanging ideas should even be considered, and if teamwork were ever needed it is certainly in line now. Perhaps a free interchange of information scattered through numbers of personal files would yield a composite picture that would aid in finding an avenue of attack which might quickly result in a means of control. Housewives and children have teamed up in a campaign to collect scrap metal towards solving one of this war's problems; and millions of men have dropped everything to team up against those human pests that now infest the world. Surely entomologists can easily scrap all personal hobbies, differences of opinions, rules of precedence, etc., and team up to solve the problem represented by some of our most common, but none-the-less dangerous insects.

Fourth: Let this Society become the leader of such a movement; use its publication, The Florida Entomologist, as a vehicle for the exchange of ideas and suggestions that may be brought up by the members and associates; and devote at least a portion of its pages exclusively to papers reporting progress made in such a campaign that, to your retiring president, at least, seems vital and patriotic.