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Christa L. Catchings, Gary J. Wingenbach, and Tracy A. Rutherford

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## Introduction

Until 2007, federal agriculture programs will be implemented through the Farm Security and Rural Investment (FSRI) Act of 2002. Gorton (2001) stated that Congress modifies and renews many United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, n.d.) programs and consequently, the 2002 Farm Bill is the collection of those modifications and renovations. Farm Bill legislation helps farmers and rural America by providing income support, commodity credit, and other programs to alleviate potential hardships that U.S. farmers and other Americans may face (Gorton, 2001).

Current programs, such as the federal conservation programs and food and fiber policy, benefit from historical and economic evolution, but are still largely directed to specific commodity producers (Browne, 1980). These connected "programs are the specific assignments that allow the bureau to undertake tasks within its area of expertise after problems have been identified" (Browne, 1980, p. 12).

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Most commodity organizations provide input to the farm bill, but research is vague regarding the value of this input (Catchings & Wingenbach, 2004). Lobbying efforts have benefited commodity organizations' farm bill input by increasing relationships with congressional aides in Washington, D.C. Some farm organizations specialize in federal legislative programs on behalf of producers, while others emphasize education, research, and marketing (Sulak, 2000).

General farm organizations tend to emphasize economic issues and the general farm program framework (Morrison, 1970). Lubben, Simons, Bills, Meyer, and Novak (2001) concluded there were "many complex issues surrounding the structure of agriculture [policy], including rural development, farm and rural credit, market competition, farm structure, agricultural labor, and commodity check-off programs" (p. VII). These issues can conflict with the views of producers, making the practice of backing one specific policy an extremely difficult decision for general farm organization leaders. In other words, just as one farm may differ from another, one farm policy may be more beneficial for one set of producers than it is for others. A need exists to assess agricultural organization members' perceptions of the 2002 Farm Bill to determine the programs and issues most relevant to agricultural producers.

Many general agricultural organizations, such as Texas Farm Bureau, emphasize grass roots lobbying (Browne, 1995). General agricultural organizations have developed communication procedures focusing on efficient economic policy, interest-group pressure, or other, often competing, sources of influences (Browne & Paik, 1994). Such procedures display the need for agricultural organization members to provide pertinent information to their leaders and lobbyists in order to achieve their objectives or shared purposes. Agricultural organizations such as Texas Farm Bureau are usually based on voluntary membership, and most local-level leaders are volunteers (Sulak, 2000).

While general agriculture organizations focus on broad farmer interests, commodity-specific organizations such as the Texas Corn Growers Association, Texas Grain Sorghum Association, Texas Cotton Growers Association, or the Texas Wheat Producers Association, specialize in one particular industry area. It can be difficult to distinguish between members who join the organization to support policy and those who join for economic reasons (Knutson, Penn, & Boehm, 1995). Commodity organizations (such as wheat, corn, and cotton) find it easier to support specific policy recommendations than do general farm organizations (Sulak, 2000).

Among the many organizations, some can be deemed special interest groups because their activities are based on providing information to policy-makers (Browne, 1995). Information sources for policy issues and processes play an important role in the development of law (Knutson, Penn, & Flinchbaugh, 1998). One such special interest group that was affected by the 2002 Farm Bill is the Texas Wildlife Association, “formed in 1985 by a group of ranchers, wildlife managers, and hunters dedicated to the conservation, management, and enhancement of wildlife and wildlife habitat particularly on private lands” (TWA, n.d., para. 2). Texas Wildlife Association (TWA) is a statewide organization that is an active supporter of wildlife and natural resource conservation in Texas and national political arenas. Do TWA members, some of whom are active ranchers and farmers, know more about natural resource provisions in the 2002 Farm Bill than general agriculture or commodity group members know?

An important finding in the Catchings and Wingenbach (2004) study was the value commodity board members placed on the Cooperative Extension Service and the land-grant university as an information source to learn about the farm bill. Respondents valued these sources and the Internet, more so than they did radio, television, or newspapers. It was not clear if board members used the Internet to access Cooperative Extension Service information, but the implication exists that a combination of Extension/university and Internet sources can be a powerful conduit to increase understanding of farm bill programs (Catchings & Wingenbach, 2004).

Catchings and Wingenbach (2004) recommended additional research to determine if agricultural organization board members used the Internet to access agricultural policy information from the Cooperative Extension Service and/or university-based Web sites. Is there a relationship between information sources used to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill and agricultural organization members’ knowledge of the farm bill’s primary programs and issues?

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to determine if relationships existed between selected Texas agricultural organization board members’ knowledge levels of primary programs and issues in the 2002 Farm Bill and their perceived values of information sources used to learn about those primary programs and issues. Three objectives guided this study.

1. Measure selected commodity-specific, general agricultural, and natural resources organization board members’ knowledge levels of the primary programs and issues in the 2002 Farm Bill.

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2. Identify the perceived value of information sources used by respondents to learn about the primary programs and issues in the 2002 Farm Bill.
3. Determine if significant relationships exist between organizational board members' knowledge levels and perceived values of information sources used to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill.

### Methods

An ex-post facto (because the 2002 Farm Bill had been enacted and implemented prior to this study) correlational design was used to conduct this study. The target population ( $N = 300$ ) included all (according to the Texas Department of Agriculture) Texas commodity-specific, general agricultural, and natural resource organization board members who may have had a stake in the 2002 Farm Bill. Personal communications with each organization's leader or director were conducted to determine the target population for those organizations who wished to participate in the study.

A proportionally stratified sample ( $n = 160$ ), to ensure equal representation, was drawn from memberships in the Texas Farm Bureau, selected Texas agricultural commodity (cotton, wheat, corn, and grain sorghum) organizations, and the Texas Wildlife Association. The sample produced 70 valid responses after appropriate follow-up procedures (Schaefer & Dillman, 1998) were used. Electronic mail reminders were sent to all Texas organizations' executive officers approximately twice per month. Despite repeated and unsuccessful follow-up procedures to nonrespondents, caution is warranted against generalizing the results of this study beyond the target population. A response rate of 44% was achieved.

The research approach was based on studies by Sulak (2000) that focused on National Commodity board members' perceptions of the 1996 Farm Bill, and Catchings and Wingenbach (2004) who focused on selected Texas commodity board members' perceptions of the 2002 Farm Bill. Data were collected using a modification of Sulak's, Catchings' and Wingenbach's, and Franklin's (1975) surveys. Researchers developed a questionnaire to explore similarities and differences between subgroups' knowledge levels of the primary programs and issues in the 2002 Farm Bill and the value of information sources used to learn about the bill.

Three specific parts of the research instrument contributed data for this study. Part one requested participants to rate their knowledge of 20 major programs and issues in the 2002 Farm Bill. The major programs and issues (biotechnology; bioterrorism/biosecurity; commodity distribution programs; conservation compliance requirements; Consolidated Farm and Rural

Development Act; counter-cyclical payments; country-of-origin labeling, crop insurance; direct payments; emergency loans; environmental quality incentive program; farm credit systems; farm ownership loans; food safety; food stamp program; loan deficiency payments; marketing assistance loans; operating loans; payment limits; and wetland protection) were derived from the USDA's Farm Bill Information Web site (USDA, n.d.). Respondents used a Likert-type scale (1 = No Knowledge...4 = Extremely Knowledgeable; 0 = No Opinion) to rate their knowledge levels from well-known items such as "crop insurance" or "commodity distribution programs" to lesser-known programs and issues such as "food stamp program" and "country-of-origin labeling." The four-point scales used in this study were consistent with those used in previous studies (Catchings & Wingenbach, 2004; Sulak, 2000) so valid comparisons could be made between previous studies and the current study. Reliability analyses revealed a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .91 for the knowledge scale.

Part two contained 15 information sources, which allowed participants to rate the perceived value of information obtained from these sources to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill. The sources were selected and modified from Sulak's (2000) national commodity board members, and Catchings' and Wingenbach's (2004) surveys. Respondents used a Likert-type scale (1 = No Value ... 4 = Extremely Valuable; 0 = No Opinion) to rate the perceived value of these sources. Information sources included: agricultural Internet sites; congressional reports; consultants; e-mail listservs; farm publications (*Farm Journal*, *Successful Farming*); national newspapers (*USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*); nonagricultural Internet sites; popular magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *Nature*); radio; regional newspapers (Texas-based papers); satellite technologies; scientific journals (*Journal of Agronomy*, *Journal of Extension*); state universities; television; and the Texas Cooperative Extension Service. It should be noted that although the researchers distinguished between information sources and channels, they believed that respondents would not make the same distinction. As such, the results could have been severely limited or nonexistent if the two variables (sources versus channels) had been split into two questions. Reliability analyses revealed a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .84 for the value of information sources scale.

Part three was designed to collect demographic information, including organization affiliation, age, education, residence, and family ownership of a farm or ranch. Content validity for the instrument was established by a panel of experts (participants from the pilot study) and researchers with farm bill experience.

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A pilot test with Texas Farm Bureau Association participants (not part of the sample) was administered in February 2004. Based upon the pilot test feedback, the final survey used in this study was changed (overall survey length was reduced).

A mixed-mode technique was used to collect data (Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). Dillman (2000) stated that as e-mail and Internet surveys gain favor with surveyors, a formidable barrier to their use is the fact that many people do not have access to the Internet. The mixed-mode technique (used in this study) offered an opportunity to compensate for the weaknesses of each method (Dillman, 2000).

First, organization leaders or directors were sent an e-mail with instructions to distribute the Internet address of the online survey to their organizational members. Second, about two weeks after the online surveys were initiated, paper-based surveys were sent to nonrespondents who chose not to use the online survey. Instructions directed leaders to distribute and collect the paper-based surveys. Correct follow-up procedures, telephone calls and e-mail messages were sent (every two weeks) to organization leaders who had not responded. Online survey data were coded and kept in a password-secured database. All data collection was completed in 10 weeks. This study was reviewed and approval was granted to conduct this study.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each variable. Multivariate analyses were conducted to determine if significant relationships existed between organizational board members' knowledge levels and perceived values of information sources used to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill. Relationships between two variables with continuous scores were analyzed using Pearson's Product-moment correlations (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

## Results

Respondents were mostly board members from commodity-specific organizations (57%) who were 46 to 55 years old (40%). They had attended college or had completed an undergraduate degree (56%), were raised on a farm or ranch (67%), and currently lived on a farm or ranch (60%) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Demographic Frequencies of Respondents (N = 70)

Variables		f <sup>a</sup>	%
Organization:	Commodity-specific	40	57
	General agriculture	21	30
	Conservation or natural resources	7	10
Age:	46-55	28	40
	36-45	13	19



Variables		<i>f</i> <sup>a</sup>	%
	26-35	10	14
	>56	17	24
	<25	1	1
Education:	Undergraduate degree	39	56
	Attended college	15	21
	High school diploma	9	13
	Master's degree	5	7
	Doctorate	1	1
Location where raised:	Farm/ranch	47	67
	Rural community (less than 5,000)	13	19
	Small city (50,001 to 200,000)	3	4
	Metropolis (over 1 million)	3	4
	Town (5,000 to 50,000)	2	3
	City (200,001 to 1 million)	1	1
Currently live:	Farm/ranch	42	60
	Rural community (less than 5,000)	12	17
	Town (5,000 to 50,000)	4	6
	Small city (50,001 to 200,000)	4	6
	City (200,001 to 1,000,000)	4	6
	Metropolis (over 1,000,000)	3	4

Note. <sup>a</sup>Frequencies may not total 70 because of missing data.

The first objective requested selected Texas agricultural organization members ( $n = 70$ ) to rate their levels of knowledge for 20 major programs and issues in the 2002 Farm Bill. A Likert-type scale (1 = No Knowledge ... 4 = Extremely Knowledgeable; 0 = No Opinion) was used to measure board members' knowledge levels, which ranged from 1.49 to 3.06 for each major program or issue in the 2002 Farm Bill (Table 2).

Respondents had some knowledge about 10 of the primary programs and/or issues in the 2002 Farm Bill, although they reported almost no knowledge of the food stamp program ( $M = 1.49$ ,  $SD = .56$ ). As a group, they were "knowledgeable" about nine primary programs or issues (crop insurance, direct payments, loan deficiency payments, payment limits,

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counter-cyclical payments, conservation compliance requirements, country-of-origin-labeling, marketing assistance loans, and operating loans) (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Selected Texas Organization Board Members' Knowledge of Primary Programs and Issues in the 2002 Farm Bill (N = 70)

Primary Issues	CS (n = 40)		GA (n = 21)		C/NR (n = 7)		Total (N = 70)	
	M <sup>a</sup>	SD	Ma	SD	Ma	SD	M <sup>a</sup>	SD
Crop insurance	3.43	.59	2.65	.67	2.14	.90	3.06	.80
Direct payments	3.33	.69	2.67	.73	1.71	1.11	2.96	.90
Loan deficiency payments	3.33	.76	2.62	.92	1.29	.49	2.90	1.01
Payment limits	3.30	.76	2.71	.64	1.14	.38	2.90	.95
Counter-cyclical payments	3.23	.90	2.57	.81	1.29	.49	2.82	1.03
Conservation compliance requirements	2.84	.75	2.55	.76	2.29	.49	2.69	.75
Country-of-origin labeling	2.60	.67	2.90	.77	1.71	.76	2.60	.78
Marketing assistance loans	2.87	.73	2.35	.67	1.14	.38	2.53	.86
Operating loans	2.65	1.03	2.55	.83	1.71	.76	2.52	.97
Environmental quality incentive program	2.58	.78	2.35	.93	2.14	1.07	2.46	.86
Food safety	2.45	.64	2.29	.64	1.86	.69	2.34	.66
Commodity distribution programs	2.46	.64	2.35	.81	1.43	.79	2.32	.77
Biotechnology	2.30	.61	2.30	.66	1.71	.76	2.24	.65
Farm credit systems	2.33	.83	2.10	.70	1.86	.90	2.21	.80
Emergency loans	2.26	.75	2.14	.48	1.71	1.11	2.16	.73
Farm ownership loans	2.17	.75	1.90	.70	2.00	.82	2.07	.74
Wetland protection	2.08	.77	1.90	.70	2.57	.79	2.07	.77
Bioterrorism or biosecurity	1.98	.58	2.00	.55	2.00	1.15	1.99	.63
Consolidated Farm & Rural Dev. Act	2.05	.71	1.90	.77	1.14	.38	1.91	.75
Food stamp program	1.59	.59	1.37	.50	1.29	.49	1.49	.56

Note. Key: CS = Commodity-specific; GA = General Agriculture; C/NR = Conservation/Natural Resources.  
<sup>a</sup>Likert-type scale: (1 = No Knowledge...4 = Extremely Knowledgeable; 0 = No Opinion).

To complete the second objective, members of selected Texas agricultural organizations were asked to rate the value of information sources used to

learn about the 2002 Farm Bill. A Likert-type scale (1 = No Value ... 4 = Extremely Valuable; 0 = No Opinion) was used to measure board members' value for 15 information sources, which ranged from 1.53 to 3.23 for each source (Table 3).

Respondents placed the most value in the Texas Cooperative Extension Service as an information source for learning about the 2002 Farm Bill ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = .81$ ). Farm publications such as the *Farm Journal* and/or *Successful Farming* were valued ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = .68$ ) slightly higher than were agricultural Internet sites ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = .87$ ) or state universities ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = .78$ ). Popular magazines (*Newsweek* and/or *Nature*) were valued the least ( $M = 1.53$ ,  $SD = .70$ ). As a group, no sources were deemed to have little or no value and none were perceived as extremely valuable (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics for Selected Texas Organization Board Members' Value of Information Sources Used to Learn about the 2002 Farm Bill ( $N = 70$ )

Sources	CS ( $n = 40$ )		GA ( $n = 21$ )		C/NR ( $n = 7$ )		Total ( $N = 70$ )	
	$M^a$	$SD$	$Ma$	$SD$	$Ma$	$SD$	$M^a$	$SD$
Texas Cooperative Extension Service	3.23	.86	3.30	.73	3.00	.82	3.23	.81
Farm publications ( <i>Farm Journal</i> )	2.95	.67	3.29	.64	3.67	.58	3.09	.68
Agricultural Internet sites	2.89	.88	3.05	.89	3.50	.58	2.98	.87
State universities	2.85	.84	3.15	.59	2.00	.00	2.90	.78
Consultants	2.36	.93	2.86	.73	2.50	.71	2.54	.88
Regional newspapers (Texas-based papers)	2.59	.79	2.35	.75	2.50	.58	2.51	.76
Congressional reports	2.38	.92	2.37	.83	2.00	.00	2.36	.87
E-mail listservs	2.36	1.10	2.10	.85	2.60	.89	2.30	1.01
Radio	2.21	.87	2.24	.77	2.00	.00	2.21	.81
Satellite technologies	2.19	1.00	2.20	.77	1.50	.71	2.17	.91
Scientific journals ( <i>Journal of Extension</i> )	1.80	.93	2.11	.81	2.00	1.41	1.91	.90
Television	1.97	.96	1.76	.94	1.67	.58	1.89	.93
National newspapers ( <i>USA Today</i> )	1.65	.68	1.80	.77	1.50	.71	1.69	.70
Nonagricultural Internet sites	1.52	.72	1.68	.82	2.00	1.00	1.60	.77

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Sources	CS (n = 40)		GA (n = 21)		C/NR (n = 7)		Total (N = 70)	
	M <sup>a</sup>	SD	Ma	SD	Ma	SD	M <sup>a</sup>	SD
Popular Magazines ( <i>Newsweek</i> , <i>Nature</i> )	1.51	.69	1.52	.75	2.00	.00	1.53	.70

Note. Key: CS = Commodity-specific; GA = General Agriculture; C/NR = Conservation/Natural Resources.  
<sup>a</sup>Likert-type scale: (1 = No Value...4 = Extremely Valuable; 0 = No Opinion).

The third objective was completed by summing and correlating respondents' overall knowledge levels of the primary programs and issues in the 2002 Farm Bill with the overall value of information sources used to learn about those programs and issues. No significant relationship ( $r = .08$ ) occurred between respondents' knowledge levels (ranging from 28-78;  $M = 48.04$ ,  $SD = 10.12$ ) and the value of information sources (ranging from 6-49;  $M = 31.46$ ,  $SD = 9.30$ ) used to learn about the farm bill.

### Recommendations and Implications

Selected Texas agricultural organization board members indicated their knowledge of the primary issues and programs in the 2002 Farm Bill. Overall, respondents were most knowledgeable about crop insurance, which coincided with commodity-specific organization board members' most knowledgeable area. General agriculture organization respondents indicated they were slightly more knowledgeable about country-of-origin labeling than they were about crop insurance, compared to the overall responses. Conservation or natural resource organization respondents were most knowledgeable about wetland protection.

These findings parallel Catchings' and Wingenbach's (2004) study, wherein commodity organization respondents were most knowledgeable about issues and programs that would "have the most impact on their organizations and probably held the greatest relevance to their livelihoods" (p. 13). Respondents' overall knowledge of primary issues or programs in the 2002 Farm Bill reflects Sulak's (2000) findings from a national commodity board leaders' study. The only difference in this study was that respondents were slightly more knowledgeable about environmental issues than were respondents in the studies by Sulak or Catchings and Wingenbach.

There is a need for more research, with equal representation of all Texas organizational board members, to identify the knowledge discrepancies between "similar" organizations. Additional study may help Texas agricultural organization board members understand better the issues or programs in current farm policies. Future studies should strive for greater

representation from conservation or natural resource organizations, to test whether their board members' perceptions are comparative to respondents in this study.

Much can be inferred from the value of information sources rated in this study. First, the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) was rated as the most valuable of all sources for learning about the 2002 Farm Bill, except by respondents from conservation or natural resource organizations, who placed a higher value on farm publications. CES is positioned well to continue its long history of providing information, education, and service to those interested in policies affecting agriculture.

Catchings and Wingenbach (2004) found commodity board members valued CES and university information sources for learning about the new farm bill. Respondents valued those sources and the Internet (agricultural sites) more than they did radio, television, or newspapers. Similar findings regarding radio, television, and newspapers were revealed in this study; however, respondents valued farm publications more than agricultural Internet sites.

People working in agricultural information services and/or policy-makers can use this information to invest budget dollars wisely to support educational CES programs and accurate reporting in farm publications (*Farm Journal* and/or *Successful Farming*) to reach agricultural organization members. In addition, efforts to communicate farm bill programs and issues should be continued in popular magazines, newspapers, Internet (nonagricultural sites), television, and radio to reach nonagricultural audiences. Additional research is needed to determine the specific agricultural Internet sites used to access agricultural policy information.

The nonexistent relationship between respondents' knowledge of the primary programs and issues in the 2002 Farm Bill and the perceived values of information sources used to learn about the bill provides opportunities to explore further this agricultural communications research. Future researchers should note that the four-point scales used in this study should be modified (via expansion or inclusion of additional points) to gain greater understanding of the ranges of potential responses. Another limitation existed in that analyses used to determine relationships between the variables of interest in this study (correlational analyses of summated scales was used to make valid comparisons with results from previous studies) might have been better suited to using a factor analysis of the farm bill program knowledge levels and information sources. Correlational analyses of the emerging factors from the 20 programs and 15 sources may produce interesting relationships and possible new lines of inquiry.

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The researchers recommend that studies similar to this one be conducted in other states and/or regions of the country. Additional insights about farm bill policies from members in the corn, cotton, and wheat belts, and fruit or vegetable producing regions will help educate our federal policy-makers prior to their writing of the next farm bill.

### Keywords

2002 Farm Bill, agricultural commodity organizations, information sources

### About the Authors

Christa L. Catchings is a sales representative for the *Lockhart Post-Register* in Lockhart, Texas, and former graduate research fellow in the Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University. Gary Wingenbach, an ACE member, is an associate professor in the department, and Tracy Rutherford, also an ACE member, is an assistant professor in the department.

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