

## Shifting paths to conservation: policy change discourses and the 2008 US farm bill

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From 2004 until 2006, reform of US agricultural subsidy programmes seemed a likely result of pressure from the World Trade Organization. Many groups saw this pressure as an opportunity to ‘green’ farm policy by crafting environmental service payments that could replace crop subsidies. Yet the 2008 US farm bill fell short of such drastic changes. This paper uses discourse analysis to trace the decline of prospects for reform of the farm bill, and a shift to incremental policy making between 2006 and 2008. It finds that, in addition to political and situational factors, striking discursive shifts altered policy debates and outcomes to create particular conservation impacts. It thus argues for broader use of rhetoric theory and discourse analysis to assess environmental policy. Implications for land conservation are presented in the context of interest group tactics.

**Keywords:** policy analysis; discourse; environmental conservation; US farm bill; commodity reform

### 1. Introduction

Between 2004 and 2006, an observer of the US farm bill debates might have thought that farm policy was on the brink of change. World Trade Organization (WTO) pressure to reduce US agricultural commodity supports was making news (Weisman and Barrionuevo 2006). Farm groups, worried about a loss of income protection that might accompany reduced supports, were calling for an extension of the 2002 farm bill. Other interest groups saw the situation as an opportunity to promote their versions of policy change, whether they were for increased conservation or other policy reforms (Kondracke 2007). However, in the end, the 2008 farm bill looked much like its predecessor, the 2002 farm bill.

US farm bills, which contain the country’s primary agricultural and conservation policies, usually change incrementally, like US policies in general (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). What was surprising between 2004 and 2006 was that major farm bill reform seemed possible. It raises the question of why reform-oriented debates garnered attention, and what their presence meant for policy change and conservation goals. This research uses discourse analysis to track cultural debates

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through the changing language of farm policy advocates from 2004 to 2008. It assesses how policy reform proposals gained traction in farm bill debates, and how they were ultimately displaced by new rhetoric and incremental policy making patterns. It also addresses the implications of this shift for agricultural conservation programmes and interest group tactics.

## 2. History of conservation in the farm bill (pre-2004)

Agricultural lands constitute approximately 45% of the US land base and are historically a significant contributor to water and air pollution and loss of wildlife habitat (Tilman *et al.* 2002, United States Department of Agriculture 2005). Farm bill legislation has attempted to address these impacts through a range of conservation programmes, including planting marginal land to trees or grasses, protecting wildlife habitat and water resources, and conserving wetlands, grasslands and forested lands. These initiatives make the farm bill a crucial piece of US environmental policy. However, conservation was not always such a central focus. While soil conservation had been a condition of farm programme supports since the 1930s, farm bills prior to 1985 had primarily focused on subsidy payment systems designed to raise farm income, minimise farmer risk and steady the grain supply by moderating production of crops like corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton and rice (Robinson 1989).

By the 1980s, the need for conservation provisions was increasingly evident. The transition from a network of diversified farms to large-scale, efficient and specialised crop operations contributed to crop overproduction, lowered prices, increased use of fertilisers and pesticides, soil erosion, water pollution and habitat loss (Tilman *et al.* 2002, Cochrane 2003). Conservation groups working to moderate these impacts successfully lobbied for the Conservation Reserve Program in 1985, which offered farmers 10 to 15-year payment contracts to plant erosion-prone lands to trees and grasses (Bonnen *et al.* 1996). CRP quickly grew from an initial two million acres to around 36 million acres. Subsequent farm bills added additional conservation initiatives, increasing related funding to over \$3 billion in the 2002 farm bill (Claassen and Ribaudó 2006). The suite of new programmes, although sometimes lacking funding, represented an important expansion of conservation legislation that was built onto the existing structure of commodity payments.

## 3. Theories of policy change and discourse

Policy change generally occurs incrementally, as legislators with diverse constituent interests negotiate compromises within particular situational and political contexts (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Because farm bill interests include commodity-specific and general farmer groups, environmental, sustainable agriculture, public health, rural development, nutrition, trade and other groups, legislators have found it in their interests to promote provisions that allow them to build broad support among these diverse constituents. As such, US farm policy has been created in a piecemeal fashion that placates a range of interests rather than produces one piece of focused legislation. This has served to increase public participation in farm policy legislation, making public discourse more influential over outcomes but also making change more difficult (Bonnen *et al.* 1996).

Nevertheless, policy can change rapidly as situational, political and interest group forces converge to produce policy windows, or opportunities for dramatic, sometimes reform-oriented, policy change (Kingdon 2003). Such situational forces include events that colour what issues stand out as important and how messages are conveyed in the policy process; they help shape the context within which policy alternatives are heard and implemented. For example, in 1996 farm policy makers favoured platforms construed as money-savers because of budget shortfalls (Orden *et al.* 1999, Lubben *et al.* 2006). The extent to which interest groups positions were seen as acceptable or the degree to which they resonated in Congress depended on how they conformed to the constraints of the time.

Situational factors also incorporate the ways in which issues are interpreted based on political discourses, or ideologies, assumptions and undercurrents. The study of discourse comes out of a tradition of post-structuralism, which builds on a notion of the world as socially constructed rather than pre-existing reality, and posits that language not only describes reality but also works to create it (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). Descriptions, arguments and actions, by selecting or emphasising certain points and leaving out others, are not neutral factual descriptors, but rather participate in shaping the object of description (Potter 1996). For example, policies framed as helping family farmers have resonated well with Congress because the discourse shapes an image of farmers as stewards of the land and keepers of an American heritage (Robinson 1989). Policies promoting rural development have resonated well at other times because they suggest a discourse valuing economic growth and community stability (Gamson 1992). Invoking a particular frame helps groups argue for a particular solution and attracts potential supporters by resonating with culturally accepted ideologies (McAdam *et al.* 1996).

The ways in which frames are mobilised and used within a particular situation depend in part on the interest groups involved and their relative resources. For example, farm organisations and commodity groups were part or progeny of an historical 'iron triangle' that created and sustained early farm bills, and as such, have obtained steady access to and influence with USDA and Congressional agriculture committees (Orden *et al.* 1999). Despite a striking rise over time in the number of citizen interest groups active in farm bill debates – environmental, sustainable agriculture, public health, rural development, nutrition, trade and others – wealthier industry, commodity and trade associations have remained relatively over-represented, leading to an emphasis on policies supporting their interests (Baumgartner and Leech 1998). The disparity in resources can be seen in an example of the Environmental Working Group, which in the early-2000s developed a database of farm programme payments that drew major public media attention to the inequities inherent in these payments. Nevertheless relevant groups and policy makers were unable to push through the farm bill a payment limitations provision largely opposed by southern commodity groups (Lewis 2009).

Classical-modernist approaches, where the material context of actors, group resources, events and institutions is considered most important to understanding outcomes, are common to the field of policy analysis. However, analysing policy with attention to discourse and framing follows what Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) describe as deliberative policy analysis, incorporating a social constructionist approach to discourse and acknowledging the ways in which language shapes reality. Discourse analysis, or a close reading of the assumptions that make a

particular interest group or policy justification compelling, is important to understanding policy change, because discourses influence how problems come to be defined and the range of alternatives deemed plausible (Potter 1996).

#### 4. Discourse analysis for agricultural policy

In policy settings, analysing discourses can illuminate *why* certain policy options seem implicitly more acceptable than others, as a policy proposal that taps into a current societal discourse often comes to be seen as the natural solution. However, such ‘natural’ solutions also change over time. For example, Gottweis (1998) shows how European policy on genetically modified organisms began as an open embrace of new technology and then shifted to cautious regulation, as public discourses came to focus on concern over its risks to the environment. While the associated material risks did not change, the language used to frame the technology did. As public concern mounted, industry shifted from highlighting to downplaying the novelty of biotechnology, and governments enacted policies designed to mitigate potential risks.

Much of the agricultural policy literature has taken a more classical-modernist approach to policy analysis that focuses on economic and market factors or policy process attributions (Orden *et al.* 1999, Schertz and Doering 1999). These studies have been important, but under-analyse how proposals are framed by interest groups and how these frames interact with public discourses to influence policy outcomes. In contrast, Dixon and Hapke’s (2003) study of the 1996 farm bill employs a deliberative approach to analyse outcomes of commodity support and market liberalisation debates. They argue that over the course of debates, opposing sides invoked images of traditional American agrarianism and farmers as the bulwark of moral virtue. Proponents of maintaining commodity subsidies, for example, wheat and cotton groups (Winders 2009), argued that farmers deserved financial support because they were the backbone of democracy, and those pushing for a reduction in subsidies and increased market liberalisation, such as agribusiness and livestock groups (Winders 2009), argued that farmers did not need price supports because they were independent and deserved to be free from government interference. These deeply rooted identities – deserving support for virtuousness or independence from interference – were conjured to support different policy outcomes, and these images interacted with broader situational factors to influence the trajectory of policy development (Dixon and Hapke 2003).

In this case, the discourse of the independent family farmer resonated with Congress and the public in a time of strong agricultural exports and prices to suggest that farmers could take care of themselves. Congress reduced subsidies, reinforcing the US as a leader in international trade negotiations of the time (Dixon and Hapke 2003). Interestingly, similar agrarian motifs had been successfully mobilised in previous farm bill debates, generally at times of low prices and exports, to justify *increased* support to deserving farmers (Schertz and Doering 1999). Thus, discourses often repeat themselves, even as their proponents and ability to reinforce current situational factors shift. In asking whether such policy outcomes can be explained by economic and political factors alone, Dixon and Hapke (2003) conclude that the ways in which discourses are mobilised to represent policy options have tangible, cumulative and lasting impacts on policy outcomes. Specifically, their analysis highlights the power of national identity discourses, in this case agrarian discourses,

to mobilise public support, adding a cultural element to classical-modernist approaches and deepening the explanatory power of policy change analyses.

## 5. Methods

A deliberative approach to policy analysis is paired here with a classical-modernist approach to assess the debates leading up to the passage of the 2008 US farm bill. The purpose is to identify discursive drivers influencing legislation and assess how they, together with institutional, political and economic drivers, affected the outcome. Particular attention is paid to how issues were framed at different times in the debates and their influence on discourse, policy outcomes, conservation impacts and future framing.

Data were gathered through document analyses, participant observation at meetings leading up to the 2008 farm bill, and in-depth interviews conducted prior to and during debates. Documents analysed included national newspaper articles collected between March 2004 and February 2008, with particular focus on the 15-month period from September 2006 to December 2007; and interest group position papers collected between September 2006 and December 2007. Documents were collected via Internet searches, agricultural news subscriptions, at national meetings and during interviews. They provided a record of changing discourses and of the group positions and strategies that paralleled these changes. All documents were analysed for content and themes based on the common frames that emerged from the study.

A total of 56 in-depth interviews were conducted between September 2006 and August 2007. Participants represented leaders within sustainable agriculture groups, environmental organisations, social justice groups, commodity associations, farm organisations, trade and industry associations, government officials and congressional staff (Table 1). The interviews provided access to a range of perspectives purposively sampled (Miles and Huberman 1994) from groups or individuals directly involved in the farm bill negotiations. They were chosen to reflect heterogeneity of perspectives and were stratified so that multiple interviews were conducted within several categories. Interviews lasted for an average of 1 hour and were transcribed for thematic analysis. Data trustworthiness was pursued through triangulation among written, oral and observed sources (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998), and

Table 1. Number and type of organisations and participants interviewed.

Type of organisation	Number of interviews
Agribusiness companies	2
Commodity groups	7
Environmental groups	7
Executive branch of US Government	3
Farm organisations	2
Lobbying firms	2
Social justice groups	7
Sustainable agriculture groups	5
Sustainable agriculture funders	3
Trade associations	5
US legislators or legislative staff	7

through ongoing observation of groups and farm policy dynamics. The analysis was also presented to participants for verification of the accuracy of their positions.

## 6. Possibility for rapid farm bill reform

Despite the historic stability of commodity provisions and historically additive nature of conservation provisions, the early stages of the 2008 farm bill debates, from 2004 to 2006, were nonetheless characterised by wide ranging discussions of commodity reforms. This was in part because under existing WTO agreements, the US and other countries were expected to reduce domestic subsidies to facilitate expanded trade (Orden *et al.* 1999). This context significantly influenced early conversations about agricultural subsidy reforms, just as it had in the 1996 farm bill debates (Womach 2005).

Trade negotiations were on the horizon just as discussions of the 2008 farm bill were beginning, and helped focus debate squarely on commodity subsidy reform as a response to trade pressure and a mechanism for saving money in a tight budget cycle (Kondracke 2007). With the 2002 farm bill set to expire in 2007, reform-oriented groups favouring changes to subsidy programmes, including some public health, specialty crop, tax-reduction, environmental and sustainable agriculture groups, saw these pressures as a window to fundamentally change policy.

Proposals included 'green payment' plans to compensate farmers for conservation of soil, water and wildlife habitat. Green payments were seen as a way to reform subsidy payments while providing a financial safety net by replacing crop subsidies with trade-compliant environmental subsidies, as had been done in the European Union (Skogstad 1998). Using green payments as a replacement for commodity subsidies was not necessarily an explicit goal of programme supporters, but environmental and sustainable agriculture groups such as the Izaak Walton League of America, American Farmland Trust and the Minnesota Project nevertheless tried to ensure that green payment plans would be beyond WTO reproach should negotiations push for a reduction in subsidies. A senior policy advisor for one non-profit group recalled that its "strategy all along had been to point out the advantages of [the green-payments-inspired Conservation Security Program] (CSP) as a means of supporting farmers, and to ... design CSP to be trade neutral" (Sustainable Agriculture Group, Interview No.11).

Alternatively, groups opposing subsidy reforms, including many commodity and farm organisations as well as some trade associations, were equally vocal in their calls to extend the 2002 farm bill until the WTO disputes were resolved. Organisations such as the National Farmers Union, American Farm Bureau Federation and National Cotton Council argued that the US would lose negotiating leverage with foreign countries if it were to pre-emptively reduce or alter subsidies (American Farm Bureau Federation 2006, National Farmers Union 2006). Of course, not all commodity or farm organisations agreed; rather the diversity of positions was quite broad.

Nevertheless, these early framings dominated debates and reflected tensions within and among the interests represented. The commodity-reform tensions in turn both signalled and contributed to the existence of a window for policy change; the mere presence of widespread tension over WTO rulings and subsidy reform, and the urgency with which these debates were framed, illustrated that such reform was indeed a possibility.

## **7. Discourses promoting and forestalling reform**

Tensions over reform of commodity price supports were manifest in the discourses interest groups used to describe their positions. In particular, there was noticeable and widespread focus on competition from foreign businesses. These discourses, as reflected in newspapers and radio, government documents and group policy briefs, faulted countries like Brazil for “threatening US dominance of world crop markets” and instigating WTO pressure to reduce domestic supports (Diaz 2004, p. A10). Such discourses reflected the concern of US farmers, farm groups, agribusiness and government leaders that if the US were to acquiesce to WTO pressure to eliminate domestic subsidies, US producers would be exposed to ‘unfair competition’ from nations with lower land and labor costs (Becker 2004, Diaz 2004). Such framings were common during the early farm bill debates and were used in particular by groups such as the National Farmers Union and American Farm Bureau Federation, who supported an extension of commodity provisions and invoked a certain degree of patriotism for ‘defending’ American agricultural production.

At the same time, reform-oriented groups used similar language to convey an opposing agenda for commodity reform and green payments. The environmental group American Farmland Trust wrote in policy briefs that WTO rulings and budget deficits were combining to favour conservation-oriented reforms that could “enhance the long-term viability and competitiveness of America” (American Farmland Trust 2006, p. 15). Their language conveyed a similar sense of national pride as well as urgency in instituting what they saw as environmentally and socially conscious reforms. Such calls were particularly widespread during the 2008 farm bill debates, as suggested by the almost 500 reform-oriented US newspaper editorials collected and publicised in 2007–08 by the Environmental Working Group as part of its farm policy efforts (Environmental Working Group 2008).

The parallel discourses of patriotism and competition resonated with Congress and the public, and affirmed the existence of a policy window for reform. As such, interest groups crafted their positions to either take advantage of or protect themselves from such reform. The relative palatability of their policy proposals depended in part on how they, groups with different levels of power and access to policy makers, made use of these dominant frames to support their cause. Evaluation of these frames and their impacts, however, was subsequently obstructed by a shift in situational context and associated discursive tactics.

## **8. The decline in reform speak**

Despite all the positioning around trade competitiveness between 2004 and 2006, the 2008 farm bill nevertheless did little to address those concerns. Post-2006, the factors contributing to this possibility of reform were overpowered by emerging situational and discursive forces related to tight budgets and prospects for biofuels from corn. As a result, Congress and interest groups sought to modify their positions by moving away from trade-related discourses.

Contributing to the decline in trade-related discourses was the suspension of the Doha Round of WTO negotiations in the summer of 2006, largely due to member nations’ inability to reach a compromise on phasing-out commodity supports (Weisman and Barrionuevo 2006). Then-President Bush’s ability to negotiate trade agreements independently of Congress through Trade Promotion Authority

provisions were also about to expire, and so Congress became free to accept or reject trade compromises in a piecemeal fashion. This in turn gave other nations less incentive to negotiate compromises lest they be modified by Congress during ratification (Palley 2007). Finally, a shift in power in Congress after the November 2006 elections further minimised the role of WTO and trade pressures. Democrats won control of both the House and Senate, effectively shifting the focus in the agriculture committees from trade oriented Republicans to domestically focused Democrats (Keech and Pak 1995).

Changes in the status of the WTO negotiations were accompanied by other farm bill drivers, including rising crop prices, which were in part affected by investment in corn-based ethanol alternatives. As prices rose, the need for farm bill loan deficiency and counter-cyclical commodity payments to farmers decreased, as these are payments activated when crop prices are low (Quaid 2006, Babcock 2007). This not only made the farm bill cheaper, but also brought the US closer into compliance with pre-existing WTO rules. Subsidy reform seemed, to many, to be unnecessary and the prospects for farm bill reform and associated discourses quickly faded.

Substantively, many farm and commodity groups reversed their calls for an extension of the 2002 farm bill. The National Farmers Union and American Farm Bureau Federation both began supporting a refurbished commodity safety net, promoting an incremental change that would benefit them rather than resisting the reform-oriented changes proposed in 2004–06 (National Farmers Union 2007, American Farm Bureau Federation 2008). Individual interest group positions varied significantly, but as summed up by a former staff member of the House agriculture committee, “the producer groups saw ... [Doha as] an untenable negotiation ... [with] nothing to gain ... [so] they said ... this is an opportunity ... to address our additional producer needs” (Legislative Staff, Interview No. 50). Thus, groups sought to benefit from the change in situational context by supporting the writing of a new farm bill that would make minor changes to, but not reform, existing policy.

Of course, not all groups fundamentally changed positions. Rather, many simply began framing them from within the new backdrop of budget concerns and biofuels. Several environmental and sustainable agriculture groups, for example, the Izaak Walton League of America and American Farmland Trust, continued to advocate for green payments, but framed their positions less around WTO and more around the conservation and social benefits that green payments would provide. One wildlife conservation group representative described it as follows:

Our policy platform ... is the same except it's not hinging on WTO so much anymore ... It's entirely accurate to say that it wasn't something that we ... wanted and were championing to begin with; we just looked at the landscape and said ... “we can leverage that to our benefit”. (Environmental Conservation Group, Interview No. 23)

For green payments supporters, this was not a rejection of the idea that green payments could be useful as trade-compliant farm supports, but rather a de-emphasising of WTO rationale relative to other benefits. While those inherently committed to WTO issues held onto that frame to advocate for their positions, and while reform proposals continued to circulate even late into the farm bill debates, many groups dropped the WTO frame for arguments that would better resonate in the changing context. One emerging frame was that of national security tied to renewable fuels production. With this change of frame and context, calls for policy



reform (e.g. green payments, payment limitations, or other scenarios) were essentially pushed to the side.

### 9. The emergence of biofuels as a driver

Rising gasoline prices in 2007 and 2008, political instability in the Middle East and concern over limited oil supplies caused many to see the US as vulnerable in its reliance on imported petroleum. Biofuels came to be seen as an important way to move the US toward energy independence, and corn-based ethanol was touted, arguably, as an environmentally friendly alternative and a new source of rural economic revitalisation (Quaid 2006, Smith 2007).

A LexisNexis search of 50 major US newspapers conducted to identify the extent to which biofuels themes displaced trade and competition as key framing devices supports this notion. Use of search terms ‘farm bill, WTO and world trade’ and ‘farm bill, ethanol and biofuels’ revealed that from January 2005 to December 2007 the number of farm bill articles that discussed biofuels increased dramatically, while the number on trade decreased precipitously (Table 2). The number of articles discussing issues such as budgets and party politics stayed relatively constant during the same period. As Boyden Gray, US trade representative to the European Union put it: “my sense is the biofuels revolution that has hit [the US] ... is the most profound change in agriculture in 200 years” (Gray 2006). Others speculated that the 2007 energy bill, with its related focus on plant-based biofuels, was “arguably more important to...farmers than commodity policy” (Babcock, quoted in Lorentzen 2007).

Interest groups from across the spectrum began focusing on biofuels as a way to advance their individual agendas. In the words of one livestock industry representative: “Six months ago, we were kind of talking about ethanol, but nobody was really getting too excited about it. And now ... all we talk about is ethanol” (Commodity Group, Interview No. 27). Similarly, in a survey of farm bill priorities released by the non-profit think tank the Farm Foundation in September 2006, renewable energy was among producers’ top three goals, even though it had not even existed as a goal in previous years’ surveys (Farm Foundation 2006). Legislators were also swept up in the idea of renewable energy and energy independence. In late 2006, House Agriculture Committee chairman Collin Peterson

Table 2<sup>1</sup>. Number of US newspaper articles mentioning key issues related to the 2008 farm bill between 2005 and 2007<sup>a</sup>.

Year	Number of articles				
	Farm bill	WTO or world trade	Ethanol or biofuels	Budget or [crop] prices	Democrat or Republican <sup>b</sup>
2005	186	45 (24%)	10 (5%)	126 (59%)	94 (44%)
2006	216	49 (23%)	41 (19%)	136 (64%)	125 (58%)
2007	983	91 (9%)	224 (23%)	547 (56%)	524 (53%)

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Articles identified using LexisNexis Academic search for each year. Numbers in parentheses indicate the percentage of articles that mentioned each key issue (category heading). Search conducted February 24, 2008.

<sup>b</sup>Key issue category, Democrat or Republican, refers to political party affiliation and to articles that analysed how Congressional committee members’ party affiliations affected farm bill debates.

called energy “the biggest issue in this farm bill” (Associated Press 2006), and Senate Agriculture Committee chairman Tom Harkin posited that “energy actually may be the engine that pulls this farm bill” (Quaid 2006).

As demand rose for corn and soybean biofuels and crop prices increased, effectively lowering subsidy payments, the status quo commodity programme came to be seen by many as an affordable option (Babcock 2007). With the closing of the political window for farm bill reform that had been the WTO negotiations, the focus on biofuels came to influence the ways in which interest groups staked out their positions, the types of policy that would eventually pass, and the specific conservation outcomes that became possible.

### 10. Discourses of farm policy stability

One of the more common ways that biofuels were incorporated into the 2008 farm bill debates was to frame the benefits of corn-based ethanol and soybean-based biodiesel as part of a broader discussion on national security and energy independence. It was commonly argued that importing oil from petroleum-producing countries made the US vulnerable to price volatility caused by political instability in those regions. Producing biofuels at home was thus proposed to make the US more secure or energy independent (Smith 2007). The national security framing invoked here was particularly acute, as illustrated in Figure 1, where a baseball cap clad farmer was presented as a homegrown energy-producing alternative to the former king of Saudi Arabia (Blank 2006). Many groups, including some like the National Farmers Union and American Soybean Association who had previously resisted WTO-induced changes, began using biofuels to advocate for continued support for commodity subsidies. The focus on biofuels helped many farm and commodity groups regain the upper hand politically by shifting them from a defensive position into a more proactive framing of their farm bill positions via renewable energy. Thus the insertion of biofuels returned the power balance among interest groups to what would have been expected historically and theoretically.

Of course other groups also employed the national security discourse to support very different agendas. Several environmental groups married national security with conservation arguments to promote biofuels development, although their support was for cellulosic ethanol rather than the corn-based variety. The Izaak Walton League of America, for example, framed its support for cellulosic ethanol as a way



Figure 1<sup>1</sup>. Who would you rather buy your gas from?  
Source: Stephen Brooks/*Jefferson City News Tribune* photo, Blank 2006).

“to displace dependence on foreign oil and decrease emissions of heat-trapping gases” (Izaak Walton League of America 2007, p. 18). The American Farmland Trust stated that “reducing our nation’s reliance on imported oil [through biofuels production] . . . protect[s] the nation’s soil, water, air and wildlife” (American Farmland Trust 2007). Thus, even groups sceptical of the environmental benefits of corn-based ethanol used national security frames to advocate a transition to second-generation biofuels like cellulosic ethanol. Many groups were quite patriotic in their framing, equating support for renewable energy with the virtues of being a good citizen. As one journalist put it:

[It is] a tough time, politically, to make a case against ethanol. With continuing turmoil in the Middle East, sky-high gas prices and presidential candidates stumping in Iowa, the heart of the Corn Belt, a new renewable fuel standard has plenty of supporters on Capitol Hill. (Martin 2007)

This patriotism resonated particularly well with Congress and the public at the time. In the words of one industry representative:

People like to know that . . . our oil . . . is coming from American farmers and not from Saudi Arabia . . . It’s one of those issues that polls so well . . . and that’s what members [of Congress] respond to. Whether it’s good policy or not . . . is up for debate. But . . . that’s the public pulse. (Commodity Group, Interview No. 33)

Accordingly, “Committees on the Hill [were] . . . elbow[ing] each other out of the way [to promote biofuels]” (Agribusiness Company, Interview No. 37). Many interest groups were inclined to build on the biofuels momentum and use such national security discourses to support their policy positions, rather than choose different, perhaps less culturally resonant frames. While an understandable choice, it nevertheless had particular consequences, especially for conservation and sustainable land use policy.

Specifically, the biofuels discourse provided common ground for a diversity of groups to work toward seemingly similar policy goals. Environmental groups such as The Nature Conservancy focused on improving the environmental footprint of biofuels by advocating provisions for cellulosic ethanol in the farm bill, farm groups such as the National Corn Growers Association sought to focus on the role of biofuels in promoting rural economic development, and many politicians focused on the role of biofuels in promoting energy independence. However, the types of biofuels promoted by each group were different, especially with regard to environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, as normally opposed groups began promoting related agendas it became easier for policy makers to support renewable energy and biofuels goals. It also became more difficult for critics of biofuels (or of commodity subsidies) to oppose or temper these perceived mutually reinforcing goals of national security, energy independence, conservation and rural economic development. Biofuels became a symbol around which consensus could occur. Specifically, environmental groups’ support for cellulosic ethanol was rolled into broader support for all biofuels as promoted by historically more powerful commodity and farm groups, sidelining concerns about the environmental impacts of corn ethanol production.

The patriotism associated with biofuels also offered distinct political advantages to policy makers over previously circulating subsidy reform proposals. Instead of being pressured to address commodity payments, Congress could sidestep the issue entirely by focusing instead on the presumed environmental, social and national

security benefits of biofuels, implicitly retaining a status quo farm policy in line with historical power dynamics. While there were certainly debates and tensions over the support of various types of biofuels production, and while these tensions did gain footing in the months after the passage of the farm bill, such points of contention were largely overshadowed during the farm bill debates (Martin 2007). Meanwhile, discussions of biofuels policy served to subvert prior contentions over commodity reform.

## 11. Farm bill conservation outcomes

In terms of conservation, the rush to support renewable energy legislation between 2006 and 2008 drowned out many critiques of the negative environmental and social impacts of subsidy-supported agriculture. Because critiques of farm subsidies were less audible beneath widespread support for biofuels, groups supportive of current commodity policy were able to focus policy makers squarely onto biofuels and off commodity reform. This in turn relieved policy makers of the need to hash out opposing stakeholder positions on commodity subsidies by instead highlighting the presumed environmental, social and economic benefits that biofuels could contribute to society. The focus on biofuels also shifted interest away from any environmental and social benefits that might have been gained, for example, through the addition or substitution of green payments for crop subsidies. Those payments might have rewarded farmers for protecting soil, water and biodiversity rather than for their intensive production of commodity crops for food, feed and now fuel.

Nevertheless, in the end the 2008 farm bill promoted renewable energy and increased nutrition and conservation spending, even while preserving commodity price supports. Despite the status quo nature of the bill, the gains made to conservation were substantial, indicating some success in the tactics used by environmental and sustainable agriculture groups. Funding, for example, was increased by \$4 billion over five years, and much of that was for working lands programmes similar to those proposed by green payments supporters. Provisions were also added to support research and development of cellulosic ethanol using biomass feedstock rather than corn and soybeans. In addition, access to such conservation programmes was broadened and signups streamlined, ensuring that additional acres would be devoted to conservation outcomes (as of mid-2009, however, total acreage affected was not known, as applications were still being processed). Additional programme rules still under development have yet to shape the policies' effectiveness; nevertheless, the passage of these provisions was widely considered a win for conservation (Baker *et al.* 2008).

These particular strides in conservation policy (as opposed to other theoretically possible strides) were made in part because of the material and discursive strategies chosen by interest groups during the farm bill debates. While, arguably, fewer gains were made to conservation than might have been expected under a reform-oriented bill, they were nevertheless substantive. In addition, these gains set the stage for incremental changes in subsequent farm bills, as interest groups observing and participating in debates gleaned insights that will inevitably guide their future farm policy tactics. In particular, interest groups might be encouraged to advance a discourse that (a) attempts to anticipate changing policy windows, (b) is not readily subsumed by competing interest groups, and/or (c) highlights opportunities for side-stepping politically challenging situations as needed to achieve their goals.

This analysis of the 2008 farm bill debates also confirms the role of the US political process in favouring incremental over rapid change. In this case, the shift in contextual factors and associated discourses employed by the range of interest groups over the course of the 2008 farm bill debates moved the discussion from one of major policy reform to a subsequent debate over incremental change through a focus on renewable energy. What initially appeared as a focus on WTO pressures and, for environmental and sustainable agriculture groups, the potential for green payments to replace traditional crop support payments, was eventually subverted by a reinforcement of crop subsidies through rising commodity prices due in part to increased demand and lobbying for biofuels. While conservation groups made important gains in the 2008 farm bill, commodity reform was not one of them.

## **12. Discourse analysis for understanding policy change**

The discursive shift from subsidy reform to biofuels development was a particularly important factor for the final outcome of farm bill debates and one that, without the use of discourse analysis, might have been overlooked. A classical-modernist policy analysis of the 2008 farm bill debates might have found that the biofuels provisions and lack of commodity reform present in the 2008 farm bill could be explained by a stakeholder consensus on the benefits of biofuels, which arose as WTO talks stalled; in other words, that biofuels policies prevailed because they reduced budget deficits and promoted rural economic development, energy independence and environmental conservation.

However, there were equally compelling arguments made at the time that questioned those benefits of biofuels, and that pointed out costs including government subsidies for ethanol and biodiesel, high energy and water consumption, financial vulnerabilities for processing plants, and a limited ability for biofuels to significantly advance energy independence (Fleischauer 2006, Morris and Hill 2006, National Research Council 2007, Babcock 2008, United States Department of Energy 2008, Pore 2009). Had these arguments been heard as clearly as those in support of biofuels, they might just as easily have steered the farm bill away from a biofuels focus. In other words, it was not simply that the overwhelming benefits of biofuels made it a winning proposition. Rather, the costs of biofuels were overshadowed not just by its material benefits, but also by the rhetorical connection between biofuels and a patriotic discourse of clean energy independence, as promoted, among others, by historically-powerful farm policy interests. The cultural resonance of national security discourse combined with environmental and rural development arguments made biofuels more politically appealing than it otherwise might have been and tipped the scales back in favour of the more historically embedded farm bill players.

Methodologically, therefore, the incorporation of discourse analysis into studies of policy change can help scholars and practitioners identify and describe important shifts in policy debates and policy windows. Here the use of discourse analysis made it possible to highlight the national security frame and the rhetoric of corn-based ethanol as a 'clean' provider of energy independence, which guided biofuels to the forefront and helped non-reform-oriented advocates regain the upper hand by focusing on biofuels development. Thus, from a practical standpoint, an understanding of discourse can help analysts and interest groups react strategically to their changing policy environment, allowing them to anticipate frames that could maximise preferred outcomes.

### 13. Conclusion

Using discourse analysis as a method of policy analysis adds to the literature by drawing attention to the ways in which language and discourse combine with situational factors and interest group dynamics to create shifting windows of opportunity for policy change, in this case during the 2008 farm bill debates. Analysing farm bill discourses and their underlying assumptions as particular worldviews rather than as objective realities is useful for helping to explain why groups took the positions they did, why certain solutions were seen as more politically feasible than others, why certain policy changes (but not others) became possible in 2008, and what those policy changes meant for environmental conservation on the ground. Deliberative policy analysis can also help interest groups discern changes in policy windows and identify discourses that can increase their relevancy in future farm bills. In this case, discourse analysis was used to show that a rhetorical move equating biofuels production with clean energy, rural development and national security obscured differences between types of biofuels production and subverted a prior discourse of competitiveness that had favoured consideration of subsidy reform. This shift, in turn, favoured an incrementally-changed farm bill.

Attention to discourse and language is an important part of analysing policy context and interest group strategies, as a policy position often comes to seem reasonable specifically because the framing taps into an underlying cultural discourse. In addition to describing real-time shifts in farm policy discourse, the intention here was to highlight the importance of discursive and cultural shifts as they interacted with material, political, interest group and economic factors, and which might be used by interest groups and practitioners to guide strategies for future debates. Further, the goal was to highlight the changed possibilities for and impacts to conservation achieved as a result of these discursive, contextual and cultural shifts. Although this study focused on conservation within farm policy, there are clear connections to analysing broader environmental policies and to tracking policy changes, or lack thereof, over time.

Analysing policy outcomes in hindsight reveals situational and cultural factors that proved important for achieving particular outcomes, but real time analysis, such as that presented here, allows for observation of how broader drivers evolve over time. In the case of the 2008 farm bill, WTO pressures ultimately were minimised, but analysing the pressures that existed prior to 2006 nevertheless provided important understandings of how interest groups framed their positions to influence debates, and what these choices meant for farm bill outcomes. The analysis thus offers a measure of how certain conservation impacts (but not others) were achieved, and may help foreshadow future frames and interest group tactics. It also provides a model for analysing environmental policy beyond agriculture, where similar debates, constructions and incentives play into the creation of new legislative actions.

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## Note

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