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Texas Agricultural Commodity Board Members' Perceptions of the 2002 U.S. Farm Bill

Abstract

Extension educators have important roles in educating the public on national agricultural policies. The purpose of the study reported here was to determine Texas agricultural commodity (corn, cotton, grain sorghum, and wheat) board members' perceptions of the 2002 Farm Bill. Male respondents, 46 to 55 years old, considered the Cooperative Extension Service/universities and the Internet as good information sources for learning about the farm bill. Cotton board members believed their organizations influenced the bill's final outcome. Extension educators should maximize their resources by using information sources suited to stakeholders' needs for learning about future farm bills.

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Introduction

The U.S. government's role in farm policy changes every 6 years. During initial debates and policy formation processes, national commodity board members and congressional leaders create farm bill provisions that affect producers nationwide. However, agricultural organization leaders cannot assess accurately if their organization's members have truly contributed to the farm bill process. Researchers (Mark, Daniel, & Parcell, 2002) found producers' and non-producers' needs and perceptions of farm bill provisions useful to policy makers in the development of the 2002 Farm Bill. Yet questions remain about agricultural commodity groups' influence and communication of the farm bill process. What U.S. Farm Bill issues are most important to agricultural commodity group board members? Do state-level commodity group leaders communicate their organizations' farm bill interests to local members in an unbiased manner?

Mark, Daniel, and Parcell (2002) studied Kansas producers and agribusiness professionals' perceptions of the changes in agricultural policy from 1996 to 2000. The results showed producers' and non-producers' perceptions of the 1996 Farm Bill (The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act) were useful to policy makers and agricultural interest groups preparing the 2002 Farm Bill. Mark, Daniel, and Parcell noted that because farm policy is created with consideration given to producers' and agribusiness persons' perceptions, it is important to gather this information. Such information would be used by policymakers in adjusting future farm bills to better fit what producers and agribusiness people need. The authors noted that Extension personnel are often in a good position to help gather this information.

The purpose of the study described here was to assess selected Texas agricultural commodity (grain sorghum, corn, wheat, and cotton) board members' perceptions of the 2002 U.S. Farm Bill. Specific objectives guiding this study were to:

1. Determine the most important producer programs in the 2002 Farm Bill.
2. Describe organizational support of the primary issues in the 2002 Farm Bill.
3. Determine organizational influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill.
4. Describe the sources of information for understanding the 2002 Farm Bill.
5. Determine if relationships existed between respondents' perceptions and selected demographic variables.

Methods

A descriptive survey design was used in the study. The target population was all Texas agricultural commodity board members representing the Corn Producers, Cotton Growers, Grain Sorghum, and Wheat Producers Associations. The target population ($N = 256$) represented the major Texas agricultural commodity groups with a vested interest in the 2002 Farm Bill. The accessible population was considerably less ($n = 100$), due to commodity boards' privacy concerns over the release of their members' personal information.

A stratified-random sample ($n = 80$) was used to elicit respondents' participation in the study. Cover letters, questionnaires, and return envelopes were sent to commodity board directors in fall 2002, with instructions to distribute, collect, and return the instruments after their annual winter board meetings. Only one response was collected from the grain sorghum association, thereby eliminating or severely limiting their inclusion in this study. A 63% response rate was attained from corn, cotton, and wheat commodity board members. Despite repeated follow-up procedures to non-respondents, caution is warranted against generalizing the results of this study beyond the accessible population.

A modified version of Sulak's (2000) 1996 Farm Bill Survey was used to collect data. Producer program importance was measured using a rank order list of six major farm bill programs (Table 1). Organizational support of the primary issues was measured using an inventory (opposed, neutral, or support) on nine issues (Table 2). Organizational influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill were measured using a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree...4 = strongly agree). The value of commodity board members' sources of information was measured using a similar Likert-type scale (1 = poor...4 = excellent). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .63 was reported for the organizational influencers scale, and .76 for the sources of formation value scale.

Content and face validity were established by an expert panel of Texas agricultural commodity board members who did not participate in this study. The instrument was field-tested and the study was approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (#2002-548). Descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses were used to analyze data.

Results

Respondents ($N = 50$) were male (98%), represented a cotton growers association (66%), and were 46 to 55 years old (46%). They had attended college or completed an undergraduate degree (80%), were raised on a farm or ranch (74%), and currently owned a family-operated farm or ranch (98%).

Respondents were asked to rank order the most important producer programs in the 2002 Farm Bill. Six programs were included from the literature to determine respondents' perceptions of farm bill programs affecting their respective agricultural commodity organizations (Table 1). Respondents ranked farm commodity programs, disaster assistance, and international trade as the most important 2002 Farm Bill programs. Foreign food aid, promotion/check-off, and conservation programs were ranked least important.

Table 1.
Respondents' Ranking of Important Producer Programs in the 2002 Farm Bill ($N = 50$)

| Programs | Ranking Frequencies ^a | | | | | | Overall Rank ^b |
|------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| | 1 st | 2 nd | 3 rd | 4 th | 5 th | 6 th | |
| Farm commodities | 44 | 3 | 2 | — | — | — | 1 |
| Disaster | 6 | 29 | 4 | 9 | 1 | — | 2 |

| | | | | | | | |
|--|---|----|----|----|----|---|---|
| assistance/crop insurance | | | | | | | |
| International trade | 3 | 10 | 12 | 12 | 11 | — | 3 |
| Conservation, environment and water quality | 1 | 2 | 21 | 9 | 13 | — | 4 |
| Promotion/check-off | 8 | 2 | 9 | 9 | 13 | — | 5 |
| Foreign food aid | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 10 | 2 | 6 |
| <i>Note</i> ^a Frequencies may not equal 50 because of missing data. ^b Overall rank was determined by weighting raw scores in reverse order; 1 st place scores received six points, while 6 th place scores received one point. Individual weighted scores for each program were summated to derive the overall rank. | | | | | | | |

Organizational support for nine primary farm bill issues was measured using an inventory (opposed, neutral, or support). Respondents indicated their organization's initial position to each issue before it became a part of the farm bill (Table 2). Selected Texas agricultural commodity board members believed their organizations initially were most supportive of issues concerning target prices, marketing loans, and planting flexibility (88%, all). Least supported (10%), and most opposed (78%), was the issue of payment limitations (Table 2).

Table 2.
Frequencies of Respondents' Perceptions of Organizational Support for Primary Issues in the 2002 Farm Bill (N = 50)

| Issues | Opposed | | Neutral | | Support | |
|---|----------|----------------------|----------|----------------------|----------|----------------------|
| | <i>f</i> | Percent ^a | <i>f</i> | Percent ^a | <i>f</i> | Percent ^a |
| Target prices | | | 4 | 8 | 44 | 88 |
| Marketing loans | 3 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 44 | 88 |
| Planting flexibility | 3 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 44 | 88 |
| Crop insurance | | | 7 | 14 | 40 | 80 |
| Non-recourse loans | 3 | 6 | 4 | 8 | 38 | 76 |
| Environmental quality incentive program | 3 | 6 | 8 | 16 | 33 | 66 |
| Conservation compliance requirements | 6 | 12 | 21 | 42 | 16 | 32 |
| Wetland protection | 4 | 8 | 31 | 62 | 10 | 20 |
| | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|---|----|---|----|
| Payment limitations | 39 | 78 | 5 | 10 | 5 | 10 |
| <i>Note.</i> ^a Frequencies may not equal 100% because of missing data. | | | | | | |

Respondents recorded their agreement levels for 12 statements measuring their perceptions of organizational influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill (Table 3). Respondents strongly agreed that their respective organizations influenced the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill ($M = 3.52$). They agreed that farm organization coalitions were essential for enacting the 2002 Farm Bill (3.49). They disagreed that their organizations' policy influence had decreased with the current farm bill more than it had compared to previous farm bills (1.84) (Table 3).

Table 3.

Descriptive Statistics for Agricultural Commodity Board Members' Perceptions of Influencers Affecting the Final Outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill (N = 50)

| Influencers | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--|-----------------|------------------|
| Your organization strongly influenced the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill | 3.52 | .65 |
| Farm organization coalitions were essential for enacting the 2002 Farm Bill | 3.49 | .77 |
| Ag Committee Chairs influenced the 2002 Farm Bill more than in previous farm bills | 3.19 | .67 |
| Farm organizations had more influence than agribusinesses on the 2002 Farm Bill | 3.16 | .62 |
| Congressional leadership influenced the 2002 Farm Bill more than previous farm bills | 2.96 | .70 |
| Environmental interest groups influenced the 2002 Farm Bill more than previous bills | 2.94 | .63 |
| Environmentalists' interests were opposite of farmers for the 2002 Farm Bill | 2.89 | .91 |
| Non-farm interest groups strongly influenced the 2002 Farm Bill | 2.84 | .80 |
| Agriculture Subcommittees influenced the 2002 Farm Bill more than in previous bills | 2.77 | .60 |
| The 2002 Farm Bill has more impact on farm production than previous farm bills | 2.66 | .73 |
| Agribusinesses had more influence than farm organizations on the 2002 Farm Bill | 2.23 | .67 |
| Your organization's policy influence in the 2002 farm bill decreased compared to previous farm bills | 1.84 | .66 |
| <i>Note.</i> A Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree...4 = strongly agree) was used to measure board members' perceptions of influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill. | | |

The value of commodity board members' sources of information for learning more about the 2002 Farm Bill was measured using a Likert-type scale (1 = poor...4 = excellent). Respondents rated seven sources of information (Table 4). Agricultural commodity board members rated Extension/university ($M = 3.13$) and Internet (2.83) as "good" information sources. Radio, television, and newspapers (2.17) and congressional reports (2.33) were rated "fair" sources of information (Table 4). No information sources achieved an overall rating of "excellent."

Table 4.
Descriptive Statistics for Agricultural Commodity Board Members' Perceptions of Information Source Value in Learning about the 2002 Farm Bill (N = 50)

| Sources | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--|----------|-----------|
| Extension/university | 3.13 | .87 |
| Internet | 2.83 | .99 |
| Magazines, journals, farm publications | 2.63 | .76 |
| Satellite technologies | 2.51 | .83 |
| Consultants | 2.50 | .80 |
| Congressional reports | 2.33 | .82 |
| Radio, TV, newspapers | 2.17 | .93 |
| <i>Note.</i> A Likert-type scale (1 = poor...4 = excellent) was used to measure board members' perceptions of the value of information sources used to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill. | | |

Respondents' perceptions of influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill and value of information sources used to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill were summated and correlated with selected demographics (commodity organization type, age, location where raised, and education) to determine if significant relationships existed (Table 5). Davis' (1971) convention was used to describe the magnitude of relationships. Relationships between multichotomous nominal and interval variables were analyzed as Cramer's V correlations (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1994).

A significant, moderate relationship ($r = .41$) existed between perceived levels of influence affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill and cotton board membership (Table 5). Cotton board members perceived their organizations influenced the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill more so than did board members from other agricultural commodity organizations. A significant, moderate negative relationship ($-.34$) existed between perceived levels of the influencers and corn board membership. Corn board members perceived their organization's influence had less effect on the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill than did board members from other agricultural commodity organizations.

Table 5.
Significant Correlation Coefficients among Selected Variables (N = 50)

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|------|-------|-------|
| 1. Influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill | - | -.03 | -.34* | .41** |
| 2. Value of information sources to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill | | - | .09 | .09 |

| | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|---|--------|
| 3. Corn Board Membership ^a | | | | - | -.74** |
| 4. Cotton Board Membership ^a | | | | | - |
| <p><i>Note.</i> ^aMultichotomous nominal variables; reported as <i>Cramer's V</i> correlation coefficients. *$p < .05$ **$p < .01$</p> | | | | | |

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Respondents were male, reared in a rural location, and operated their family-owned farms or ranches. The vast majority had attended college or held an undergraduate degree, which bodes well, when coupled with age and experience, for the leadership being provided to the corn, cotton, and wheat commodity boards. Respondents valued target prices, marketing loans, and planting flexibility issues most in the 2002 Farm Bill. Board members perceived these programs had the most impact on their organizations and probably held the greatest relevance to their livelihoods. These findings mirror an earlier study of national commodity board leaders' perceptions of the 1996 Farm Bill (Sulak, 2000).

The value Texas agricultural commodity board members placed on the Cooperative Extension Service and university as information sources has relevance in all states. Based on the findings, the following action points should be implemented in all Extension and/or university-based agricultural policy Web sites:

- Provide updated agricultural policy materials that are easily found and/or accessed from the site's initial entry page.
- Provide segmented (by commodity group interest) farm bill information to reduce search time and drill-down effects.
- Determine, through Web page hits, what types of agricultural policy materials are being accessed most and least often, by site visitors.
 - Conduct research with stakeholder groups to determine agricultural policy information type, format, and delivery method most desirable for learning more about the U.S. Farm Bill in a Web-based environment.
 - Conduct research with other groups to determine the information and delivery format (text only; graphics; streaming video; etc.) desired in a Web-based medium.
- Reduce efforts in producing educational resources that are radio-, television-, or newspaper-based.

Additional research will help us understand the relationships between agricultural commodity board members' perceptions of and influences on the final outcome of future farm bills. Increased efforts are needed in gathering, analyzing, and reporting agriculturists' perceptions of national agricultural policies and communication methods needed to reach policy makers and the public.

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