

THE 1985 FARM BILL AND FUTURE FAMILY POLICY EDUCATION

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When talking about the groups involved with the farm bill and the potential groups affected, it is tempting to treat the groups as if they were mutually exclusive. In reality there is a great deal of overlap especially when it comes to discussing families. However for purposes of this paper I want to concentrate on those families not directly involved in farming. If farmers make up approximately 3 percent of the population then I am really concerned about the other 97 percent and our efforts to reach them with policy education programs. Those directly involved in agriculture will usually be reached through their farm organizations.

There are consumer groups that have been involved with the farm bill but only a small segment of the population really has any contact with them. Some of the consumer groups may actually be at cross purposes with others by their insistence on cheap food and fiber for consumers without considerations of other factors. Although it may seem more ethical to some people to represent consumers rather than a commodity group such as wheat producers, cotton growers, etc., the consumer groups are also special interest groups with a particular political agenda.

General Public

There still is little contact with the nebulous group known as the general public. This is the group that sees the headlines about the huge amount of money spent on the farm bill. They often do not read to the end of the news article where the last sentence explains that entitlement and other programs are also included in the bill. If they do, they may not realize that entitlement programs include food stamps, Women, Infants and Children (WIC), school lunch and other feeding programs or that the extension service and experiment station are also authorized under the farm bill. This is also the group paying the taxes to support such programs. Although there is a lot of talk about voter apathy there is growing concern over government expenditures and the inability to balance the federal budget. This

concern could get translated into the election of legislators who are much less supportive of large farm programs. Although there seems to be public sympathy for farm problems, the sympathy appears to be for individual farmers not agriculture as an industry.

I am not here to either defend or critique the present farm bill. I am operating under the assumption that there will be another bill in 1989 if not sooner and for that reason I am convinced we need to do some good policy education for the general public.

I would like to begin with a minor point that has more impact than we realize. The slang term "farm bill" immediately sets up a barrier for most people. If they don't farm why should they be interested in the farm bill? Since it is unlikely the term "farm bill" will be dropped any time soon we will need to do a lot of continuous education rather than wait until a bill is pending. Education done only while a bill is under debate also appears to be self-serving, thus much of the information is tainted in the mind of the public.

Of particular interest to the general public is the food supply. Americans have become accustomed to a stable, low cost food supply year round. A rise of 10 cents a pound in meat prices is enough to make the six o'clock news. When the same news program reports farmers receiving less than \$2 a bushel for grain that cost almost \$4 to produce, the public is upset over the way farmers are treated. There appears to be little understanding of the relationship between farm prices and food prices. In fact food prices are probably more reflective of transportation and marketing costs than of the actual cost of production. Yet there definitely is no free lunch for everyone. Somehow the costs have to be paid. If they are not paid at the supermarket checkout line, then they are paid as taxes which then subsidize farmers in a variety of ways. Although there are advantages and disadvantages to this system, the big problem is that the true cost of maintaining a stable food supply is hidden, and, in the efforts to reduce federal spending, subsidies for agriculture are likely to be cut as well. The public needs a better understanding of the current policies as well as the alternatives for maintaining a stable food supply.

There are many components of the farm bill that get lost in all the publicity over the large payments some farmers received. More efforts need to be made to inform the public of these other provisions and their effect on them. For example, not only do food stamps provide aid to low-income families but they also slightly increase the demand for food and provide a level of economic stability for local retail markets. Emergency feeding programs provide help during disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, etc. The housing component of Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) has enabled many rural residents to purchase decent housing without having to relocate to a more urban area.

Conclusion

If support for agriculture is to continue, extension is going to have to increase its efforts to help the general public understand the agricultural system. These efforts need to be ongoing, not just tied to the passage of a particular piece of legislation. More work needs to be done in translating legislation such as the farm bill into terms with which the public is familiar, including discussions of who pays the costs and who benefits from various alternatives. We do a good job of talking to ourselves and related groups but there is still a lot of misunderstanding. We may need to skip a refereed journal once in awhile and write instead for the popular press. There are plenty of people writing but few who really understand the system. Instead of so many articles on the high cost of food or the poor quality of winter tomatoes we need more on the miracle of a stable year round food supply at a cost most countries would envy.