

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

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There is little doubt that the need to balance environmental and social concerns with concerns about economics (i.e., the obvious need for farmers and ranchers to make a reasonable profit) has taken on an increased sense of urgency in U.S. agricultural circles over the past decade. Although agricultural economists and policy makers have long been aware of environmental constraints, even a cursory review of agricultural policy, research priorities and public pronouncements during the early 1980s reveals that, on balance, production outweighed environmental considerations in our national policy priorities. Today, however, virtually all sectors of agriculture seem genuinely concerned about how this nation and, indeed, the world can develop an agriculture that simultaneously addresses these urgent multiple goals.

It is agriculture's preoccupation with these seemingly contradictory objectives that has generated much of the recent discussion about sustainable farming systems. Indeed, the idea that we must develop an agriculture that is at once economically profitable and environmentally sound lies at the heart of the ongoing sustainable agriculture debate. Better documentation of resource depletion and environmental degradation resulting from agricultural production practices, coupled with the mid-1980s economic stresses in agriculture, has led to multiple critiques of the economic, social and environmental sustainability of American agriculture. The decision to devote an entire half-day session at this conference to this general theme highlights the urgency now being attached to the subject of sustainable agriculture.

Some Questions

In order for policy educators and policy advocates to begin balancing environmental and social concerns with economic interests in agriculture, it is essential that these and other decision makers have a clear understanding of the character of these interests. What are the principal environmental and social concerns germane to the development of a sustainable agriculture? Who shares these concerns? What lies behind the heightened level of concern? What are the policy implications inherent in these concerns? In light of these concerns, can a greater measure of balance actually be achieved? How?

Major Concerns

The principal environmental and social concerns raised within the framework of agricultural sustainability have been noted frequently by a wide range of observers in recent years (U.S. Department of Agriculture; Edwards, et al.; National Research Council; Francis, et al.). The most recent articulation of these concerns emerged within the context of the 1990 farm bill debate. The 1990 farm bill itself reflects, in numerous ways, the general thrust of these concerns.

These and other sources reveal increasing concern about:

- Pollution of ground and surface water with agricultural chemicals and sediment.
- Hazards to human and animal health from pesticides and feed additives.
- Adverse effects of agricultural chemicals on food safety and quality.
- Increased pest resistance to agricultural chemicals.
- Increased cost of purchased farm production inputs.
- Reduced soil productivity resulting from soil erosion, soil compaction and loss of soil organic matter.
- Over-reliance of our agricultural production system on nonrenewable resources.
- Destruction of wildlife, bees and beneficial insects by pesticides.
- Continued loss of mid-sized, family farms.
- Continued deterioration of small, rural communities.
- Continued loss of wetlands and prime farmland.
- Social inequities in agricultural production systems and farm structure arrangements.
- Continued increase in capital intensity of our agricultural production systems.
- Farm worker safety.
- Adverse consequences for the environment and farm structure resulting from U.S. agricultural research and education policies and priorities.

Who Shares These Concerns? Why?

Unfortunately, the distribution and intensity of environmental and consumer group attitudes and beliefs regarding these and related issues are very difficult to assess. The fact that major elements of the conventional agricultural science, policy making, and producer communities share these concerns only adds to the difficulty of developing a complete and precise picture of the environmental and social ideological landscape of American agriculture.

Part of the problem stems from the enormous range of issues of interest to environmental groups, as well as those focusing primarily on family farms, rural communities and farm income. Moreover, even within a single organization, individuals may focus on only one or two issues. In this pluralistic organizational environment, there are bound to be specific conflicts between groups and individuals that otherwise

share a broad ideological vision for agriculture. An example of this inherent conflict emerged during the 1990 farm bill process between those advocates whose primary goals revolved around income protection for family farmers (social concerns) and those within the environmental community who tended to view high commodity price supports as contributing to chemical intensive, monocultural production systems with their perceived environmental disadvantages.

While environmentalists and more socially oriented agricultural policy advocates may not always agree on specific policy priorities, there is fairly broad consensus among such groups over the root causes of their principal concerns. For the most part, these organizations believe that past policies, especially commodity and research policy, have focused too heavily on ways to increase production of our major cash export crops. This perceived emphasis on production, it is believed, has led, in turn, to our current system of highly specialized, chemical and capital intensive farming systems. Such groups further believe that current policy inevitably will maintain the present trajectory of ever larger and more specialized and intensified farming systems with their attendant negative consequences for the environment, family farms and small rural communities.

Taking commodity policy as an example, there is widespread agreement that guaranteed target prices and deficiency payments tied to the major cash grain crops have encouraged overplanting and the intensified production of these commodities. The understandable farmer response to such incentives (e.g., the excessive use of purchased fertilizer and pesticides) accounts in large measure for such undesirable consequences or externalities as soil erosion, water contamination and loss of wildlife habitat. Without substantive policy changes, environmentalists and those more socially oriented agricultural policy advocates are convinced such conditions will worsen in the future.

An Altered Policy Environment: Implications for Policy Education

As noted above, agricultural policy today is being framed within the context of a greatly altered policy environment. Both the substance and process of agricultural policy making are in transition. The traditional system is being impacted in unprecedented ways by a host of new issues, perspectives, ideologies, agendas and individual actors. These new players in agricultural policy are rapidly gaining in knowledge, skill and confidence. They are well-schooled in the political process, they are determined, and they are not going to go away.

Some long-time observers of agricultural politics believe these new coalitions now dominate the agricultural policy subsystem. According to Don Paarlberg, for example, "The conclusion is inescapable: farm organizations, the agricultural committees of Congress, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the land grant colleges have lost control of the farm policy agenda."

Analysts, of course, disagree over the extent to which these new elements are now influencing the agricultural policy process. In my own

view, for example, Paarlberg underestimates the importance of the changing ideologies and new personalities within the traditional system itself. The fact is that environmental and consumer lobbies now find considerable sympathy within the land grant colleges, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and Congressional agricultural committees.

Leaving questions of causality aside, it seems increasingly clear that a host of new agricultural issues are posing substantial intellectual, technical, financial and administrative challenges for the traditional agricultural policy development and delivery system. The issue of agricultural sustainability illustrates the difficulties our agricultural institutions face in addressing this and other new challenges within a greatly altered policy environment.

Agricultural Sustainability

The concept of agricultural sustainability has, by its very nature, brought into question the viability and appropriateness of current production techniques and farm structure trends. Predictably, the ideology of sustainability is disquieting for those policy makers, scientists and industries that share a sense of responsibility and pride for having shaped the character of modern conventional agriculture. There are many within our agricultural system who view the sustainability issue as an indictment of what has come to be known as conventional agriculture. The perception by many within conventional agriculture that these new critics have assembled under the banner of sustainability as a strategy for the promotion of new environmental and consumer agendas, rather than as serious proponents of sustainability, has greatly politicized the sustainability debate. Ambiguities surrounding the definition of sustainability (Lockeretz) have added to the increasingly political nature of current discussions over how best to achieve the goal of long-term sustainability. Presently, for example, proponents of "low-input" versus "high-input" agriculture are locked in an increasingly contentious debate over which kinds of technologies can best contribute to the creation of an agricultural system that can be maintained indefinitely. There is little disagreement over the importance of this goal. The divisions revolve around the means that can best achieve the goal (Schaller).

Conclusion

It is critically important that ways and means be found for achieving sustainability in our agricultural systems. To this end, policy researchers and educators can and must play a central role in clarifying, not only the concept of sustainability, but also the motivations and goals of those who are currently engaged in the sustainability debate. Policy analysts can also contribute positively to this effort by helping to guide the debate more toward the identification and measurement of objective sustainability criteria. Shifting the focus of these discussions to empirical indicators of sustainability would help to rationalize and depoliticize the current debate. Without such efforts by those who

occupy positions that allow for greater objectivity, I fear the concept of sustainability will fall victim to what has been called the symbolic use of politics.

While there are clear limits to the rational model of policy making, in this instance it still would seem to hold out a necessary, if not sufficient, means for making progress toward balancing environmental and economic interests in agriculture. Without greater clarity, it will be virtually impossible for agricultural policy makers to address and develop coherent and comprehensive policies designed to achieve agricultural sustainability.

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