Stewardship Values: Still Valid for the 21st Century?

by William P. Browne, Jerry R. Skees, Louis E. Swanson, Paul B. Thompson, and Laurian J. Unnevehr

Both policymakers and the public are captives of myths that evolved over time about our agrarian past. These myths are notions based more on tradition or convenience than on fact, and as such, they are stumbling blocks to policy reform. Nowhere is this more evident than in the failure of agricultural policy to address environmental issues.

An important part of the agrarian myth is the belief that farmers place great value on stewardship of the land and thus follow sound environmental practices. But in recent years the public has become aware that agriculture degrades the natural environment through eroding soil, polluting water, and destroying wildlife habitat. Consequently, environmental advocates now raise serious questions about the commitment of farmers to be good stewards of the nation's natural resources. Therefore, we must reconsider the relationships among stewardship values, agricultural policies, and environmental quality.

Stewardship and the Pastoral Ideal

Agrarian values have deep roots in American history. The key idea of 18th and 19th century agrarian philosophy was that farming unifies self-interest and the public good. Thomas Jefferson emphasized that if farmers own land, they will embrace policies that support the stability of democratic government. Ralph Waldo Emerson stressed that farm work brings human needs into harmony with nature's cycles, making it natural for farmers to achieve self-realization through their life's work. While non-farmers might achieve the virtues of citizenship and harmony with nature, farm life is a moral ideal because these virtues are wedded to farmers' self-interests. For Emerson, farmers' self-interest includes stewardship of the land. There is no conflict between self-interest and the public good.

➢ Many Americans believe that farmers place great value on stewardship and accordingly follow sound environmental practices. This belief has become a stumbling block to developing policies that address environmental issues. The stewardship myth, having evolved from the earliest days of our nation has many outmoded elements. Belief and behavior diverge for several reasons, none of which is unique to agriculture.

Wendell Berry's writings on the importance of the family farm highlight the same theme. He writes about how farm families experience the unity of nature within the diversity of their lives. Members of the family perform roles, specialized by age and sex, that also define their place in the family's social order. A diversity of tasks is also reflected in the change of seasons—plowing in spring, nurturing the crops through summer months, harvesting in autumn, and then repairing tools and buildings in winter. In Berry's world the American farm family is at one with nature not in the sense of pastoral bliss, but by unifying diverse economic, cultural, and environmental forces behind the goal of family survival.

Berry suggests that modern society demonstrates the conflicts that arise when specialists follow their own detached and narrow self-interest. "Checks and balances," (in our market economy) he

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writes, "are all applied externally, by opposition, never by self-restraint... The good of the whole of Creation, the world and all its creatures together, is never a consideration because it is never thought of; our culture now simply lacks the means for thinking of it." As human beings become less reliant on their own individual abilities to be flexible and ingenious in responding to natural adversity, they lose the farm family's capacity to appreciate the importance of environmental harmony. For Berry, there is full consistency between nature's needs and the family's needs. This consistency, in turn, leads to good farming practices that are environmentally sound.

But this belief is only partially true not only for the modern commercial farms that Berry and many environmentalists distrust, but for the traditional small farms as well. True, farmers have an incentive to promote certain aspects of environmental quality. Farmers still have an interest in preserving soil fertility, for example. But in other cases their economic interests diverge from environmental quality. For example, farmers as a group display no more concern than non-farmers for endangered species. Throughout the past two centuries they have actively tried to wipe out large predator species and other "pests"—wolves, cougars, groundhogs.

"The images of farm life in harmony with nature can be seen in the work of great American landscape artists."

West Rock, New Haven, by Frederic Edwin Church.
Courtesy of New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Connecticut; John B. Talcott Fund.

There is also an ever-expanding middle ground of issues where the link between farm interests and environmental quality is unsettled and contentious even among farmers. For example, farmers themselves disagree about chemical use and water quality.

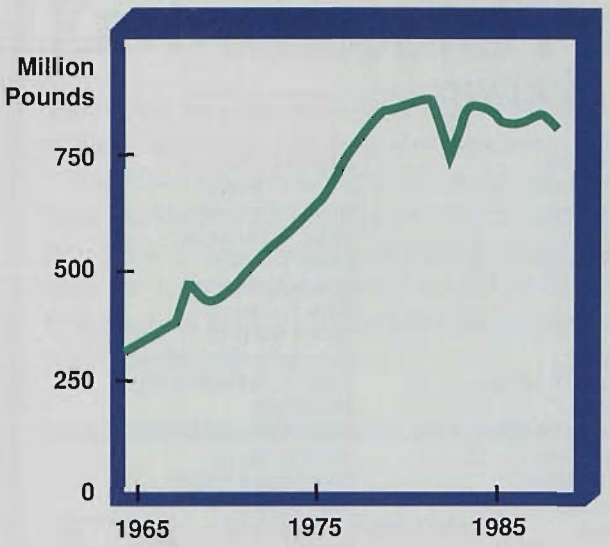
Americans' perception of what constitutes good policy is affected by nonagrarian myths as well. Throughout our nation's history, Americans have tended to think of nature as detached from everyday surroundings. City dwellers "get back to nature" by vacationing in wilderness areas, conservation preserves, and parks, rather than in farming areas. Biologists and ecologists build scientific models of natural systems that do not include humans, even those who farm. Consequently, pristine, uncultivated places provide the dominant norm for the ideal "environment."

Pristine nature and agrarian stewardship ideals have combined in the national consciousness as *the pastoral ideal*. Taken literally, pristine wilderness is a norm that agriculture, by definition, cannot fulfill. And environmentalists have probably never attempted to reconcile this ideal with the agrarian myth that "good farming is always good stewardship." But farm activists have often responded to environmental issues as if the actual political objectives of environmentalists are to return agricultural resources to a pristine state of wilderness. As a result, farm advocates argue in the extreme that all farmers are good stewards and promote the pastoral ideal itself, despite its contradiction with emerging 21st century agriculture. Promoting the pastoral ideal has kept us from examining how farmers' self-interests can be made more consistent with maintaining and improving environmental quality.

White Calf, by Thomas Hart Benton.
Courtesy of Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Farmers, government agencies, and environmental groups all strongly value conservation. But because they see different uses for soil, water, and wildlife habitat, they have conflicting views

Pesticide use by U.S. farmers more than doubled between 1966 and 1987



Note: Since 1982 the quantity has varied with fluctuations in the acreage under production. For example, pesticide use declined in 1983, largely because 78 million acres were taken out of production.

Source: Espelin, Grube, and Kibler, EPA., July 1991.

about what counts as environmental quality. The public, too, holds inconsistent expectations. By believing in the contradictory values of pristine, uncultivated nature and farmers as natural stewards, the public expects that farmers will voluntarily comply with the highest environmental standards as they go about the necessary task of bending nature to their will. At the same time they think that those standards can be met without fundamentally adjusting farm practices. Thus, most government programs place heavy reliance on farmers' good intent rather than regulation.

Furthermore, the contradiction between modern farming and pristine nature reflects conflicts between environmental quality and material progress. Our society values both the environment and material wealth, though perhaps unevenly. This situation produces confusing public policy discussions: farmers invoke images of agrarianism in rationalizing their stewardship and then champion technology, while preservationists struggle to hang on to a production system that could not produce the products they demand. Few, if any, realistically see either the environmental or social consequences of modern agriculture.

Why Environmental Degradation Continues

The contradiction between widely held stewardship values and continuing environmental degradation by agriculture stems from three causes, none unique to agriculture:

- Certain actions, insignificant as an individual occurrence, can have a large environmental impact when repeated over time by many individuals.
- Institutions and their leaders are often slow to change their practices and policies to be consistent with new concerns of society.
- Some government policies actually encourage environmental degradation.

Aggregate Effects of Individual Action. Farmers seldom realize the damage agriculture causes to the environment. One example relates to destruction of wildlife habitat. One farmer drains a pothole to increase production and reduce the cost of plowing around it. But if all farmers in the northern prairies were to drain their potholes, they would eliminate breeding grounds for a great many of North America's waterfowl. Another example, noted by Crosson, is the high cost of off-farm damage from soil erosion, which USDA and the Conservation Foundation estimate to be three times greater than on-farm damage to productivity. The major off-farm costs, largely due to siltation in bodies of water, stem from reduced water recreation, increased flood damage, reduced water storage capacity, and more maintenance for waterways. None of these costs is directly evident to farmers upstream.

Farmers are understandably reluctant to reduce the adverse effects of their practices on the environment if it means lower profits for them. Reducing off-farm damage does not boost farm profits, but almost always costs farmers more. These economic realities should not discredit the importance of stewardship, nor should acknowledging the conflict between farmers' individual economic interests and the public good. Rather, these are necessary first steps for society to effectively come to grips with environmental issues.

Social Institutions Lag Behind Public Concerns. Environmental policy has evolved over time to include goals that benefit farmers less directly. In the 1930s, soil erosion was the focus of agricultural conservation policy. Since then, agricultural practices have changed. Chemical use has become common; the amount of pesticides used by farmers more than doubled between 1966 and 1987 (Figure 1). With increased chemical use came an increased potential for pollution of off-farm surface water and groundwater. Furthermore, the loss of wildlife habitat due to farming continued; the U.S. Department of the Interior estimates that conversion to agricultural use accounted for 87 percent of U.S. wetlands lost from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s.

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The public has become alert to the issues of both chemical use and wildlife habitat, and their attitudes have been reflected in public policy. Reichelderfer and Hinkle trace the evolution of government regulation of chemicals, from protecting farmers against fraud to more broadly protecting the environment and consumers. They note that rising incomes lead urban citizens to put a high value on scarce wildlife habitat, endangered species, and the visual amenities of rural America.

Unlike earlier policies, which aimed to help farmers, more recent policy proposals are more likely to hurt them. Attempts to slow down chemical pollution and wildlife habitat destruction directly raise farm production costs, with few benefits to farmers in return. So the newer environmental issues contain the potential for more conflict between farmers and non-farmers.

Government Policies That Sometimes Encourage Environmental Degradation. Farm-price and income-support programs have actually contributed to environmental degradation. For example, commodity program benefits are tied to production of certain crops. This program design encourages farmers to grow particular crops and to produce more on every acre enrolled in the program. In addition to farm income and price supports, federal policies also provide rangeland and water resources to farmers at subsidized rates. These policies encourage farmers to use more chemicals, to cultivate or graze fragile land, and to exploit

aquifers; they also discourage crop rotations. In effect, farmers are paid to maintain production on fragile land, to use scarce water resources, and to use increased amounts of fertilizers and pesticides to achieve higher crop yields.

Of course, environmental degradation is not the goal of the offending policies, but simply an unintended and thoughtless consequence. As Reichelderfer points out, because public funds are increasingly limited, these policy inconsistencies have become more important. Furthermore, as environmental goals become broader over time, old conservation policies become increasingly outmoded.

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The Renewed Importance of Stewardship

The pastoral ideal has long been honored in American culture. It conjures up ideas and meanings that reinforce a society's image of itself, its inherent dignity, and its basic goodness, and it provides an ethical basis for evaluating its choices about social and economic development. Our attraction to pastoral symbols can be seen in the continuing popularity of great American landscape artists such as Frederic Church and Thomas Hart Benton. Their images reach deep into the nation's collective psyche, what we believe to be good and right about our past. Thus it is hard to let go of the pastoral ideal.

The images of farm life in harmony with nature are promoted in the books we read to our children. We teach them the animal sounds as Farmer Brown makes his way from pen to pen. We teach them that the seasons are tied to planting, growth, harvest, and regeneration. These images also teach the virtues of independence, hard work, family, and community and that the natural environment is interwoven with those virtues. These values are certainly worth teaching, but they create mischief for the policy process when they are identified exclusively with the relatively few Americans who are still family farmers.

Farm-price and income-support programs have actually contributed to environmental degradation.

The public expects farmers to be all things: to be profitable, to be stewards of the environment, and to be producers of a cheap, safe food supply. Farmers, to their credit, have been willing to take on, if not always fulfill, these expectations. The fact that farmers have economic and personal incentives for preserving our soil, water, and other resources has been essential in promoting sustainable agriculture. But that is not enough.

Certainly, farmers need to pursue profits. But the trick for public policy is to have farm prices reflect the cost of environmental degradation. Current farm programs confuse price signals and make some kinds of degradation more profitable. Further, the market does not reward farmers who are good stewards with higher commodity prices.

Improving environmental quality and conserving resources in rural America may involve new technologies, but new technologies are not absolutely necessary to solve our problems. Techniques for maintaining sustainable agricultural systems already exist. Ironically, many of these techniques would be more profitable in the absence of current farm programs.

We need to recognize that market solutions and voluntary actions are not sufficient to reduce environmental damage from agriculture. Facing up to this fact does not diminish the importance of stewardship values or the pastoral ideal. But it does mean that solutions will require compromise and cooperation among competing social interests. The staging area for that compromise is the public policy arena. C

This essay is drawn from *Sacred Cows and Hot Potatoes: Agrarian Myths in Agricultural Policy,* Westview Press, 1992.

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