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RIGHT VERSUS RIGHT—FINDING COMMON GROUND

*John Campbell
Ag Processing, Inc.*

Production agriculture is correctly portrayed as being in conflict with the natural environment.

Production agriculture is also undeniably responsible for the planet's capacity to sustain five billion people at relatively high nutritional levels.

The result of this dichotomy is that both environmental and agricultural advocates claim the moral high ground in public policy debates.

At the extreme, both camps also claim the other is an advocate of mass starvation. Farmers, because they are supposedly plundering the earth's sustaining resources, and environmentalists, because they appear to advocate eliminating practical means of food production.

Finding common ground is what democratic public policy formulation is all about.

Common ground does not mean that all sides are satisfied equally. Development of North America by our European ancestors was made possible by a pro-development public policy. Pro-development public policy included scores of incentives to expand agricultural production Westward. Key to this development was the acquisition of land such as the Louisiana Purchase, military containment of native peoples, investment in infrastructure such as railroads, easy resource access for agricultural entrepreneurs through the Homesteading Acts and establishment of technological institutions for agriculture such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the State Land Grant Universities.

My own family ancestors took advantage of the 19th century American public policy known as "Manifest Destiny." Daniel Freeman, was the first homesteader in America. He staked out his Nebraska Territory claim near what is now a little town called York.

Times have changed in York, Nebraska, and all over the agricultural heartland of America. Daniel Freeman would roll over in his grave if he were to learn that "Manifest Destiny" has given way to "Manifest Regulation."

The tug and pull of the policy debate is much more even today. Surprisingly, the environmental side of public policy has only taken thirty years to gain equal, or better than equal, strength with more than 300 years of pro-development policy.

The challenge of harmonizing agricultural production with environmental protection is evident at all levels of government from the township to Washington, D.C.

At the outset, we must recognize that neither extreme will prevail. Farmers and ranchers will not be allowed to wantonly waste or pollute natural resources. Property restrictions and indirect regulation of farmers, through direct regulation of the agricultural input and output industries, are already a fact of life and will not be reversed.

Similarly, American society will not revert to scattered tribes of hunter gatherers living and dying as a result of nature's unimpeded cycles.

The issues confronting public policymakers in the closing moments of this millennium are simply offshoots or extensions of issues brought to the forefront in the 1960s. In their simplest form, they involve clean air, clean water and clean land. In their most complex form, they involve very technical debates on the nature and cause of human disease such as cancer and the workings of a complex planetary ecosystem that impact global climate change.

The average American and the average public policymaker have sympathies on both sides of the debate. Public survey after public survey rates environmental concerns high on the list of American issues. Those same surveys show Americans are also highly concerned about job security, wages and the economy.

At the gut level, Americans desire a clean environment, but they know it will involve change that may harm their personal fortune. Therefore, the concept of environmentalism is accepted, but the application is feared.

This fear is especially true in the case of small business owners such as farmers and ranchers. Already burdened by high health care costs, heavy property and income tax loads, constantly changing labor and safety standards and new, highly sophisticated global competitors, these small business people tend to automatically recoil at the mention of further environmental regulation.

Farmers and ranchers feel besieged on all fronts and are unable to understand why their own public approval ratings have fallen.

Compounding the frustration is the fact that while environmental and other regulation has blossomed the political clout of agriculture is withering on the vine.

Agricultural Advocacy and the Changing Power Structure

America has become more urban and suburbanized. These demographic shifts have been picked up in census figures and translated to legislative redistricting. For example, between 1966 and 1985, the number of rural Congressional districts declined from one in three to one in five. The 1990 census is expected to show continuation of this trend. When my grandfathers farmed, Iowa had as many House seats as California—eleven each. Today, Iowa has five and California has fifty-two!

In a very short period of time, agriculture has gone from being a political powerhouse to being relatively insignificant as far as legislative representation and voting power is concerned. Compounding the problem is the fact that America's agricultural leadership is fragmented and unfocused. There is an old joke that says whenever two or more farmers get together to work on a problem at least one new farm organization is formed with fifteen subcommittees.

The so-called "general" farm organizations such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union, National Farmers Organization and Grange have roots in a time of greater balance between rural and urban interests. The one newcomer to the "general" farm organization category is the American Agriculture Movement born in the late 1970s as the 70s boom turned to bust.

At the federal level, it is safe to say all of these organizations have lost influence. At the state level, their influence varies. This influence loss is due not only to the declining rural and farmer population, but to deep philosophical divisions and a belief that the organizations need to deal with issues ranging from health care to gun control.

As the influence of the general farm organizations have fallen, new "specific" commodity groups have arisen in stature and funding. These groups represent the specific interest of wheat or corn or cotton or cattle producers. Their influence has grown in part because of a unique funding mechanism called a commodity "check-off." Most of the bulk commodities and livestock now have a small deduction made at the time of sale which is remitted to a national or state commodity organization.

Despite their relative wealth, the specific commodity organizations have also lost influence. Part of their lost influence is due to intercommodity infighting, but these groups are mostly oblivious to each other, which may be an even larger problem than their occasional squabbles. Most of their influence loss is due to the fact that budget constraints in Washington and global desires for freer trade have swamped their narrower interests.

One group of organizations that has maintained their influence are those that receive the most protection or support from the federal

government and are also relatively isolated geographically. These include sugar, peanut, tobacco, cotton and rice organizations. These organizations are single-minded, well-financed and tend to support each other on many issues.

To recap, then, we have the “general” farm organizations which have tried to be all things to all people in their particular philosophical camp and the specific commodity groups that have tended to focus only on the price and income supports or trade barriers affecting their particular commodity.

The Environmental Challenge and Strategies for the Future

As a consequence of preoccupation with philosophical ideals and specific commodity interests, the environmental challenge has largely gone unanswered by the agricultural community. There are a few notable exceptions which we will examine in a moment.

Another reason agriculture has had little influence in the environmental debate is that much of the debate is carried on in forums they find unfamiliar and many times hostile. Agricultural groups are accustomed to a warm reception in the House and Senate Agriculture Committees. Much of the environmental debate takes place outside these committees and in agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of the Interior.

To their credit, environmental advocates have recognized this dynamic and have tried to reach reasonable compromises within the domain of the agricultural committee. Examples of these mutually agreeable compromises are the Conservation and Wetland Reserve Programs.

Much more divisive issues loom in the domain of nonagricultural committees. Examples include reauthorization of the Clean Water Act, wetland protection, food safety and labeling, chemical regulation and a host of other environmentally-related issues impacting agriculture and agribusiness.

Focusing on examples of agricultural success may give us an insight into strategies that the agricultural sector could employ in the future.

The first example is Proposition 39 in California. This 1988 ballot initiative was otherwise known as “Big Green.” Big Green was drastic enough not only to unite agriculture, but to motivate a coalition of industries that would have been similarly impacted. This coalition of California industries pulled off a stunning upset and defeated a major environmental initiative. One of the key reasons industry was able to turn the voters around is that they were able to evaluate the cost of Proposition 39 in terms voters would understand.

Another area to watch is the courts. Recently the Washington

State Apple Commission requested contributions from agribusiness to sue the producers of the prime time news program *60 Minutes*. Apple growers believe the Natural Resources Defense Council and *60 Minutes* acted improperly regarding the chemical Alar and, in the process, seriously damaged the apple industry.

Agriculture and agribusiness may also weigh in on a recent court case castigating the federal government for not implementing an absolutely strict standard to an anticarcinogen law known as the “Delany Clause.” Absent a successful legal challenge, the agricultural sector must coalesce with other industries to change the “Delany Clause” legislatively.

Unfortunately, history suggests that agriculture will only unite when presented with a clear and immediate danger. Most environmental issues are incremental or indirect, and they impact the cost of production rather than the price of a commodity. The agricultural lobby tends to be more highly motivated to action by public policies directly related to the price of a product rather than those that impact costs, such as the price of fertilizer.

Looking to the future, agricultural interest groups may be beginning to adjust their priorities. As federal funds for agricultural support continue to dwindle, their relevance to farm well-being also dwindles. Also, as trade barriers begin to fall, protectionism will become less and less important to selected commodities. These two phenomena, less subsidy money and freer trade, will leave agricultural advocates no choice but to work on policies that impact production costs and which also tend not to divide along philosophical lines.

Finding new industrial and value added markets is another area on which agriculturalists will need to focus. Industrial products may provide common ground for agriculturalist and environmentalist. Until very recently, public policies to support ethanol have been supported by both sides. Hopefully, we will be able to move beyond the current dispute involving ethanol and implementation of the Clean Air Act.

Areas of promise involve clean, nontoxic diesel fuel from vegetable oil and animal fat. Vegetable-based ink that eliminates the deinking problem with paper recycling. Building materials made from recycled products such as paper and wood which can be manufactured with the assistance of agricultural products.

It is entirely possible for agriculture to turn the debate on legislation such as the Clean Water Act from a minus to a plus. For example:

- Mandating that only easily biodegradable, nontoxic fuels be used on our navigable and recreational waters.
- Requiring that products likely to enter the sewer systems or run

off into rivers and lakes be biodegradable and nontoxic. Examples include automotive antifreeze, deicers for airplanes and hydraulic and lubricating oils for equipment working in pristine areas such as national parks and forests.

The list goes on, but the point is that some environmental initiatives provide opportunities for agriculture's unique characteristics of biodegradability and renewability.

The Changing Social Contract

In closing, it appears the social contract between agriculture and society is changing. The past contract could be characterized as simple price and income support from society in exchange for production control from the producer.

The new social contract continues to provide price and income support from society. However, society is becoming more concerned about the means of production than the quantity produced.

Agriculture could leverage the concerns of society into greater price and income support if they enlisted the assistance of powerful allies such as the environmental communities. The other side of the bargain will undoubtedly mean that agriculture makes even greater strides in areas of concern to the environmental community.

Only time will tell whether agriculture motivates itself to take advantage of environmental opportunities, whether its various elements unite to fight what they believe are unfair environmental burdens and shift their focus to priorities of the future rather than the concerns of the past.