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AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD POLICY ISSUES AND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

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It has now been nearly half a century since the federal government became involved in the first major farm programs. Great changes have taken place in farm policy since then and will continue in the future.

In this paper, I propose to examine a part of the process by which these changes in agricultural policy occur. First, will be an attempt to describe the agricultural legislative process; a short civics lesson. Second, what are the general issues as seen from a legislative standpoint, and third, what are the specific legislative items now on the agenda.

Legislative Process

For the most part the paper concentrates on the House of Representatives side of Congress. The Administration influences the legislative process, but I contend that at least during most of the 1970's they have had less impact on agriculture than in previous years.

Congress is more intent on setting agricultural policy and having the Administration administer that policy, even to the point of defining legislation rather narrowly so that there is little leeway in how policies and programs are administered. This lack of administrative discretion can be an obstacle to efficient and effective government program operations. However, it reflects some mistrust of whatever Administration may be in power—the question is whether congressional intent will be carried out.

This illustrates what many people consider to be a serious flaw of our system of government. Our system is rather cumbersome and somewhat inefficient—slow to react. It is also probably the world's most open and free system of government. It is because of this openness and freedom that our system tends to be cumbersome and inefficient. Only a country as wealthy as ours could afford such a system. I for one, however, am more than willing to pay the price to maintain this freedom and openness in government.

Who are the agricultural policymakers in Congress? They are by and large the members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees. There is also one other very important group, the Agriculture Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee, particularly with regard to agricultural research. This subcommittee seems to cast an even longer shadow in the House of Representatives than in the Senate.

Let's look at the agriculture committees. The House Agriculture Committee has 42 members, 27 Democrats (majority) and 15 Republicans (minority), and is divided into 10 subcommittees. These subcommittees are cotton; dairy and poultry; forests; livestock and grains; oilseeds and rice; tobacco; conservation and credit; department investigations, oversight, and research; domestic marketing, consumer relations, and nutrition; and family farms, rural development, and special studies.

Each House member serves on two committees, one major such as the agriculture committee and one minor such as House administration. A member can serve as chairman of only one legislative subcommittee and between his two committees can serve on a maximum of five subcommittees. Each agriculture subcommittee chairman has one staff person to handle his subcommittee.

The full committee has in addition a professional staff of 10 on the majority side plus support staff. The minority has six subcommittee staff and eight full committee staff plus support staff. One of those is an agricultural economist and most of the others are lawyers. All of these, professional and support staff, total about 60 people.

Committee members other than subcommittee chairmen have to depend on their personal staff for their agricultural work. Members will usually have one aide who handles agriculture—most of these aides also cover some other area or areas. Over half of the House of Representatives has been in office less than three terms so that compared to historical trends this is a relatively young and inexperienced Congress. The Congressmen tend to have more staff and resources available for their use than their predecessors—but they have to deal with infinitely more constituent problems than did their predecessors.

The Senate committee is similarly organized but with fewer members, fewer subcommittees, fewer staff. The staff tends to be more centrally directed and senators serve on more subcommittees and chair more subcommittees and committees than in the House. The Senate Agriculture Committee has three times as many agricultural economists as the House does. The question is whether this means that the Senate agriculture staff is three times as good or three times as bad as the House agriculture staff.

There are major differences in how the House and Senate deal with agricultural matters. There is a simple reason for the difference. Each state has some agriculture. New York and California are major

urban areas but they are enormously important agricultural states as well.

Thus, every Senator has an agricultural constituency and is to some extent an agricultural Senator. The House is quite different. Congressional districts are generally small geographically and the overwhelming majority of Congressmen come from urban or suburban areas. Most have little or no agricultural production in their districts. Thus, agricultural legislation is much more difficult to pass in the House than in the Senate.

What and who influences legislation and why does Congress adopt particular programs?

In agriculture, general farm economic conditions at the time the law is being passed are probably the single most important factor. When farm prices are reasonably high farmers and their organizations worry about maintaining the exportability of their products and allowing the farmer a maximum of marketing freedom and production flexibility. On the other hand when prices are low, farmers and organizations tend to worry about income maintenance, reduction of surplus, and achieving higher support prices.

The Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 was mostly written during a period when farm prices, other than wheat, which had begun to drop, were at "acceptable" levels. Had the bill been written six months later after farm prices had fallen rather generally, it probably would have been substantially different.

Secondly, Congressmen and Senators respond to their constituents. Each of the commodity groups have different interests. It is important to examine both the regional interests and commodity production interests of the districts represented by the various committee members. Soybean farmers have a different perspective of program needs than do wheat growers. But, Southern soybean producers have a somewhat different perspective of program needs than their Midwestern counterparts.

Midwestern soybean growers, most of whom had been corn growers, have traditionally not been strong participants in voluntary agricultural programs. They have not in general supported mandatory programs. Southern soybean growers on the other hand are much more receptive to farm programs. Many, particularly those who had previously grown cotton have long experience with strong government programs and tend to favor stronger programs for soybeans.

Commodity groups are a powerful force on farm legislation and their influence increases as they become more and more established and adept at dealing with the political process. The check off programs are providing funds to operate a professional staff that can keep up with legislative issues and insure that the organization's views are heard.

One-issue groups such as commodity groups are becoming more and more prevalent in Washington today. They have less trouble setting their goals and fewer internal conflicts than do the general farm organizations. They are more difficult to bargain with and less willing to compromise thus making the legislative process more difficult. They may, however, do a better job of representing the wants and needs of their membership simply because those interests are more narrow.

And finally members of Congress have philosophic views which influence their actions on programs. The personal philosophy of a few key leaders can be very important in the outcome of legislation. Committee and subcommittee chairmen can be particularly important in this context.

General Agricultural Issues

Let's examine some of the general agricultural issues presently facing Congress or likely to face Congress in the near future.

Trade protectionism, a particularly dangerous issue for agriculture, continues to appear in the political process. The bushel-for-a-barrel and export restrictions on hides are but two recent examples which have been raised on the floor of the House of Representatives. Fortunately neither passed. However, with the inflation and energy situations and the general feeling that the U.S. is being abused by the rest of the world and OPEC specifically, there appears to be some resurgence of protectionism. At least a part of the public is looking for a "painless" way of getting even with OPEC, and protectionism measures are very appealing in this context.

Farm structure and the survival of the family farm continues to be a hot agricultural issue. Probably enough attention has already been paid to the issue at this conference so I have only one point to add, a word of caution. The continued trend of further concentration in agriculture has in the opinion of many been the result of economic forces outside the purview of farm program and policy and even tax law for that matter. Remedies that would stop or reverse this trend could turn out to be so drastic for agriculture and/or the whole economy that they are completely unacceptable.

My caution, therefore, is to avoid building expectations that we cannot fulfill; i.e., the expectation that we can and will stop the continuing trends to further concentration in agriculture. We may not be able to or want to. However, these same economic forces could be changing to such an extent that they would alter this trend. Energy prices and controls on chemical usage may have an impact on the scale of agriculture.

Conservation and environmental issues are likely to be very important in the next year. In the conservation area, major changes in the government programs on soil and water conservation are likely

during the next two or three years. There appears to be substantial support for a complete revamping of conservation legislation. Part of this new concern for conservation stems from the concern over water pollution and part from the loss in farm productivity.

On environmental issues, there appears to be a sentiment for more balance between the pragmatism of production needs and ecological concerns. The harsh economics of reality have forced some of these adjustments. Environmental issues are likely to continue as a major debate, but more compromises seem likely. One good example of the kind of compromise that we are likely to see more of in the future is RARE II. On the one hand this will provide more wilderness areas but will also mandate normal forest management in areas which have been under study for years.

Crop insurance is one of the most important programs conceived in agriculture during the 1970's. It may over time turn out to be as important to domestic agriculture as the grain reserve. That is, if it is passed and implemented, which is not certain at this point. The program has great potential for the government to assume some of the individual producer's risk while allowing the individual producer to manage the remaining risk with little government involvement in production or marketing of the product.

Domestic and international humanitarian programs will continue to be important issues. Food stamps and related domestic feeding programs along with P.L. 480 and other international food programs have a very strong impact on domestic agriculture. Both will likely continue to generate controversies, but neither is likely to be cut back in the near future. In fact both are likely to continue to grow.

Export promotion and market development activities have received a great deal of legislative attention during the last two years. This attention will continue as the U.S. tries further to capitalize on its ability to export agricultural products. Six agricultural trade offices are now in place and open doing business or will be within 60-90 days. In addition 10 of the agricultural attaches have been upgraded to the status of agricultural counselor.

On the commodity program side, only minor changes are likely before the 1981 farm bill. In 1981, however, the debate on new legislation is likely to be one of the more lively debates of recent years. Certainly all of the activity on structure will add to that debate. The AAM and their calls for higher supports and mandatory programs will also have an impact on the debate.

The legislative front on agriculture is very busy and likely to continue to be through the 1981 farm bill. There is ample activity on a wide variety of issues so that those interested in involvement in the agricultural legislative process should find ample opportunity for input.

