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THE 1985 FARM BILL AND FUTURE NATURAL RESOURCE POLICY EDUCATION

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Extension educators can learn much about the opportunities for policy education in natural resource issues by examining the experience with the 1985 Food Security Act. As usual, extension educators, especially policy specialists, spent a great deal of time working with county extension agents and state clientele, explaining the policy options and consequences. Most of the educational work was focused on farmers and farm group leaders, a logical audience for programs on farm policy.

However, the 1985 bill was somewhat unusual in that it contained many conservation-oriented provisions such as cross-compliance, the sodbuster and swampbuster provisions, and the conservation reserve (although whether the reserve is properly classified as a conservation policy is open to debate). In any case, the 1985 law contained some policy changes and the direction of change was clearly toward greater attention to conservation.

More remarkable was the way in which the conservation provisions appeared in the final version of the farm bill. The key actors were not the usual set of farm organizations, although farm groups had considerable influence on the outcome. The key difference from previous farm legislation was the role of conservation groups and lobbyists in inserting more conservation-oriented provisions in national farm policy. This newfound power to influence farm policy may soon evaporate, but it is also possible that the success in 1985 will energize conservation and environmental groups to push even harder during passage of the next major farm bill.

The increasing importance of conservation and environmental groups in the farm policy process presents a great opportunity to public policy educators. In effect, we have a potential new audience for educational programs on farm policy. The self-interest of the new conservation/environmentalist audience is clearly affected by the outcome of the farm policy debate, the new audience recognizes that its interests are affected and the group has demonstrated that it can have an effective voice in shaping farm policy. These groups should

have a fairly high demand for policy education on farm policy in general and should be particularly interested in the relationship between farm policy and their conservation or environmental objectives. From an educator's perspective, these groups are interested learners with an ability to put knowledge to work in addressing current policy issues.

But before we conclude that policy educators should address this new audience we should ask ourselves a few questions and think about how we could deliver educational programs.

Some Key Questions

As extension educators we should consider the implications of addressing educational programs to this new audience. The conservation/environmental groups are largely nonfarm people, sometimes with interests that are directly opposite those of the farm community. Working with conservation groups on farm policy would be quite different from working with farmers who see their own economic interests served by farm legislation. About ten to fifteen years ago policy educators added consumers to the list of audiences that should be included in policy education programs. Although we have sometimes included consumers in our audiences only in theory, at least we have a long organizational tradition of extension home economists working with rural consumers on nutrition and other food-related issues. Although extension has long been involved in natural resource policy education, we do not have the same level of organizational commitment as with farmers and consumers.

My personal opinion is that extension should seize the opportunity to work with conservation and environmental groups on farm policy. But there is risk in undertaking such work. We will be working with unfamiliar groups whose interests may conflict with those of the farm community. Strong administrative backing will be important. Although we are accustomed to working on controversial issues with groups with opposing interests, it is important to understand the risks.

A more basic question is whether we have anything to offer the conservation/environmental groups. Do we know enough about the conservation effects of various policy options? Do we know what policies should be on the list to discuss with these new groups? It is clear that the usual set of commodity price support programs will not be sufficient to satisfy the educational interests of the new audience. Policy educators are fairly adept at estimating the farm commodity price effects, and the farm income effects, of various policy options. But we have not had as much practice and may not be as skilled at identifying conservation or other third-party effects. If extension is to address the educational needs of this potential audience, some rethinking of our approach to policy options will be required.

On a more basic level it is clear that extension can offer the conservation and environmental groups some unique insights on agricultural policy. We are able to provide a perspective on agriculture in its global setting that conservation groups do not have, and we can point out the effects of conservation policy options on the farm operator and the farm family income. This perspective and analysis should have considerable value to groups seeking to influence farm policy. Perhaps most important, we can offer an objective analysis of farm policy and conservation options from a neutral political position.

Designing New Programs

Extension educators cannot hope to reach the new conservation audience in the same way as the farm audience. We must develop some different methods to deliver our programs. At the local level it is difficult to envision how we can operate. For some groups, such as the Sierra Club, it might be possible to obtain a spot on the agenda of one of the club's periodic meetings. Other groups are not organized locally or are only occasionally active in some project. Some groups have very different objectives at the local level than at the state or national level. In general, it may be possible to reach a few groups at the local level, but not many, and in many counties the opportunity to meet with the conservation groups will not exist.

At the state level most conservation and environmental groups are somewhat organized and many groups even have paid staff. However, these state-level staff are not numerous and are not likely to be terribly interested in farm policy since they usually focus on state-level policies affecting their group's interest.

One clear opportunity for educational programs with the new audience is at the national level. At the national headquarters, many staff members are assigned to national policy issues and the organization maintains a keen interest in national legislation affecting the group's interests. Many national environmental and conservation groups maintain offices in Washington, D.C., and many other small, unaffiliated, general-purpose environmental lobbying organizations also operate there. These staff members and leaders are a logical target audience—they are aware of the importance of farm policy for their interests, are active in the farm policy debate and have the ability to put knowledge to work.

Reaching this national audience will require a different approach to policy education. An educational program would be truly a national policy education effort, requiring the cooperation of specialists from several states. The state extension administrative apparatus would need to be convinced of the usefulness of the educational effort even though little of the program impact could be identified within any given state. The national policy program could not be centered around producing materials and, in fact, the new audience may not

be appropriate for mass-printed materials except for the most general topics. The most effective "material" by far might be an article in the various organizations' national magazines or newsletters. Extension educators would need to "sell" the program idea to the audience, a task made difficult by the lack of previous contact with the audience.

The increased role of conservation and environmental interest groups in determining farm policy presents a new set of opportunities for extension educators. We have a new and potentially very large audience, and a chance to educate an important portion of the U.S. population on agricultural policy issues. Meeting this challenge poses some risks for the organization and will require some changes in the definition of a policy education program at least in some states. But if we capitalize on the opportunity we will become more relevant to the actors in the farm policy debate and will gain support for extension policy education in the process.