
Current Issues

Link Agricultural and Environmental Interests

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Stop and ask an Agriculture Committee member in the halls of Congress to name major national environmental groups. The member could probably identify dozens—the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and many more. Next, ask what major issues these environmental groups typically focus on. A few years ago, the member's response would probably be the conventional environmental areas of air and water pollution and natural habitat protection. Now, however, *agricultural land policy* might be as likely an answer as protection of the snail darter.

Beginning of Change

William K. Reilly, president of the Conservation Foundation, recalls a 1982 meeting between a group of conservationists and USDA officials. Concluding the meeting, Assistant Secretary John Crowell turned to the group and said, "The need as we see it is to downsize the U.S. agricultural production machine. If you conservationists can help us do it in such a

way that we reduce agricultural subsidies and also benefit the environment, we have an opportunity to cooperate."

This was typical of the exchanges between the conservation and environmental communities in 1982. By late 1983, agricultural policy and its impact on land management had become a rallying point for many of the Nation's mainstream environmental, conservation, and natural resource groups. Following successful coalition building in the late 1970's on a wide variety of environmental issues, these same public interest groups turned their attention to the Nation's farm policy and the upcoming 1985 Food Security Act, otherwise known as the farm bill.

Environmentalists Support 1985 Farm Bill

Interest from environmentalists in the 1985 farm bill debates was driven by obvious linkages between overproduction—encouraged by massive farm support programs—and poor manage-

ment of much of our country's most erosive agricultural land. Their interest was further fueled by an emerging awareness that nonpoint source pollution—primarily from agricultural runoff—was contributing to the Nation's inability to achieve fishable and swimmable water quality standards.

For years, representatives of environmental groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council had been urging the adoption of conservation "cross-compliance." The argument was that by conditioning farm support upon the development and implementation of conservation plans, Federal farm support dollars could be saved and significant reductions in erosion rates would be achieved. Those "radical" arguments went largely unheard until the Nation's economic farm crisis and skyrocketing Federal support payments opened the door for serious discussion about new ways to control Federal farm spending.

As the issues of conservation and the Nation's farm debt crisis became the dominant agricultural themes in 1983 and 1984, environmental, conservation, and natural resource groups seized the opportunity to inject conservation planning into farm policy debates. Representatives of these groups knew that collectively they could capitalize on the emerging budget-cutting, policymaking atmosphere. Congress appeared ready to reduce the costs of farm support programs, to provide financially pressed farmers with new financing options,

and to remove millions of highly erosive acres from production.

Conservation Coalition Formed

Informal efforts to organize a "Conservation Coalition" were begun in 1983. By 1984, members of well over 20 national environmental, wildlife, conservation, legal defense, farmland, forestry, and agricultural groups had begun developing a unified conservation agenda. By early 1985, the Conservation Coalition was meeting regularly and cooperatively advancing their unified conservation positions.

Conservation Legislation

Emerges. Using skills honed in earlier environmental battles, Coalition members pressed their conservation agenda before congressional agricultural committee members and staff. The strongest conservation legislation since the 1930's was the result. Included was a 45-million acre Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), new swampbuster and sodbuster provisions, and conservation compliance requirements for all highly erodible cropland in the country.

Responding to the need to provide alternate financing options for America's farmers, the Conservation Coalition also supported the "farm debt restructure and conservation set-aside" provision of the 1985 farm bill.

Agricultural Land Policy on

Agenda. The successes of the Conservation Coalition have changed forever the way in which farm policy will be decided in this country. Members of the conservation community, par-

ticularly the environmental groups, now add soil conservation and agricultural land policy to their permanent legislative agendas. The Sierra Club, for example, even hired staff to address agricultural land policy issues.

Environmental Concerns

Overproduction. To the environmental community, wheat and corn surpluses do more than signal economic problems for the farm sector. Surpluses also signal the overuse of our agricultural land resources. In turn, overused land resources signal long-term environmental problems. Robert Healy, Thomas Waddell, and Kenneth A. Cook, all of the Conservation Foundation, report that 28 percent of the fertilizer and 40 percent of the pesticides used in this country in 1986 went for the production of surplus corn and wheat. Environmental groups are asking the obvious question, Just where do all those farm chemicals end up?

Agricultural Sources of Pollution. Increased and more technically accurate monitoring of ground water continues to show direct linkages between agricultural chemical use and ground water contamination. Such direct linkages will keep ground water pollution and Federal agricultural policy high on the environmental agenda.

Similarly, agricultural nonpoint source pollution control continues to gain attention within the environmental community. The Environmental Protection Agency and numerous national studies have shown that our

Nation's surface water quality will not improve significantly unless agricultural sources of pollution are treated. Because agricultural nonpoint source pollution is best treated by modifying farm management practices, environmentalists will likely push for increased technical assistance to farmers and increased monitoring for noncompliance.

Environmentalists have targeted support for funding of the Agricultural Productivity Act (APA) to encourage the increased adoption of low-chemical agriculture in 1987. Passed as part of the 1985 farm bill, the APA encourages research into, and support for, new and alternative agricultural production systems.

Wetland Drainage. The environmental and conservation communities also will continue to combat wetland drainage for agricultural purposes. Wetland drainage has resulted in significant losses of fish and wildlife habitat and aquifer recharge areas. Despite reduced Federal farm program incentives to drain wetlands, this natural resource continues to be lost at annual rates measured in the hundreds of thousands of acres. To curb the continued loss of wetlands, members of the Conservation Coalition used the sodbuster concept to include wetland drainage provisions in the 1985 farm bill.

Supporting Conservation Legislation

A key question now facing environmentalists is whether the Federal Government will seriously carry out

and defend the numerous conservation provisions of the 1985 farm bill. Environmental groups have indicated that they will vigorously oppose actions to repeal or dilute conservation provisions of this bill.

Conservationists pushed hard for the rapid development of interim CRP rules, and closely monitor the program's success. Coalition members rigorously support long-term funding of the program and also will likely support a 20-million-acre expansion of its original goal.

Considering CRP's success, environmental groups are beginning to ask whether Federal acreage reduction targets could be linked to other conservation objectives and used to solve

existing environmental problems. Ground-water pollution control, for example, might be a logical "next step" in linking farm surplus reductions with environmental pollution control.

Future Cooperation

Environmental groups continue to pose new farm policy questions and seek new ways to adjust farm policy so that it will benefit both the farmer and the environment. Although farm and environmental groups may have found themselves on opposite sides of the fence in the past, the gates are now open and a new era of cooperation is underway.