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Public perceptions of conservation policies

Farmers, ranchers, suburban homeowners, urban residents, communities and other private landowners are the stewards of the nation's basic natural resources: soil, water and air. It is they who determine, through their actions, whether we will have healthy soil, pure water and breathable air. Their attitudes and opinions regarding the success of existing programs and the changes and modifications that need to be made in the future are important inputs in the development of conservation policy. These opinions are expressed through individual actions and the collective actions of agricultural, environmental and commodity groups. They provide a significant source of information for the development of the 2002 Farm Bill.

This appendix provides an overview of those attitudes, gleaned from surveys, Congressional testimony, listening sessions and publications. A review of this information indicates a number of common themes running through many of the reports and publications. The appendix describes these common themes and provides more detailed information on recommended actions and policy decisions that they suggest.

- ◆ Extension and modification of existing programs with increased funding and expanded eligibility.

Among all of the opinions sampled, there was nearly unanimous agreement that none of the existing conservation programs should be eliminated, but all of them should be expanded and funded to include more land and more landowners. In a number of listening sessions sponsored by the Soil and Water Conservation Society, there was nearly unanimous agreement that "expanding the reach of existing USDA conservation programs should be the most important conservation objective of the next farm bill." Participants recommended a combination of increased funding and programmatic reform, but agreed that more funding is by far the most important factor (Soil and Water Conservation Society 2001). The American Farm Bureau testified before the House Agricultural Committee in the spring of 2001 that the Environmental Quality Incentives Program should be increased nearly tenfold from previous fiscal year levels (U.S. House of Representatives 2001).

The report of the Commission on 21st Century Production Agriculture also recommends the continuation of both the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), with modifications in CRP to target buffer strips, filter strips, wetlands, grass waterways and partial field enrollments. The report also recommends sufficient modifications in these programs so that underfunded groups such as minority and limited resource farmers are not excluded (Commission on 21st Century Production Agriculture 2001).

Several organizations, including the Soil and Water Conservation Society, noted the current bias toward land retirement as a means to conserve resources. They cited the need for a better balance between financial assistance

for land treatment and land retirement so that farmers can keep on farming in a manner that enhances the environment, rather than having to leave farming to conserve resources (American Farmland Trust 2001a, Cox 2001, Defenders of Wildlife 2000, Commission on 21st Century Production Agriculture 2001). Some comments noted a variety of constraints to program participation that should be addressed in the upcoming Farm Bill. These include the complexity of applications, inconsistency of programs and the “one size fits all” approach. Several groups called for the provision of more flexibility for small and limited resource farmers, as well as a greater variety of management practices and economic incentives for the landowner to choose from.

There is some sentiment for NRCS to expand its programs and activities in urban and rapidly growing areas, particularly with farmers on the urban fringe. The USDA Policy Advisory Committee on Farmland Protection and Land Use has recommended that USDA “ensure that its programs and policies are flexible enough to meet the needs of each community’s unique set of resources and problems” (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2000a).

- ◆ Establishment of new programs, and modification of existing programs to enable farmers and ranchers to increase farm income while conserving natural resources (for example, “green payments”).

The concept of “green payments” has been a topic of interest for several years. Green payments are a “subset of agri-environmental payment programs that have both environmental and farm income objectives” (Claassen et al. 2001). According to the Economic Research Service (ERS), “Green payments are frequently discussed as an alternative for, or supplement to, current farm income and environmental programs.” Such a program must be designed carefully, according to ERS, to avoid unintended consequences and to assure the greatest environmental benefit. The American Farm Bureau, National Corn Growers Association, National Farmer’s Union, National Grain Sorghum Producers, American Soybean Association and U.S. Rice Producers Association have all supported a voluntary environmental incentives program that pays producers for conservation practices already in place or to be applied (U.S. House of Representatives 2001).

Defenders of Wildlife support the concept of green payments in their recent policy paper. They refer to the objectives of the proposed Conservation Security Act (CSA), which allow for green payments to producers in exchange for providing environmental and ecological benefits on their land. Not surprisingly, they are interested in green payments because they would allow agricultural producers to be compensated for the “environment amenities they provide on private lands, including the restoration and conservation of native wildlife habitat” (Defenders of Wildlife 2000).

The Agricultural Conservation Innovation Center (ACIC) of the American Farmland Trust has proposed “creating an agricultural wetlands trust that

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increases farm income and environmental values” (American Farmland Trust 2001a). Because the high cost of existing mitigation systems precludes most farmers and ranchers from participating, the ACIC proposes a wetland mitigation trust that is environmentally sound, and affordable for the farmer by using a “trust” model rather than a “bank” model.

In its report “How Much is Enough for 2002?” (Wildlife Management Institute 2001), the Wildlife Management Institute recommends the establishment of a conservation security program that would reimburse landowners for providing key conservation practices on their land. A system of “conservation credits” would assure that the landowner would receive higher payments for more conservation. Support for an easement program to retain native grassland has also gathered widespread support (U.S. House of Representatives 2001).

- ◆ Stewardship-based agricultural conservation policy that rewards landowners for resource conservation practices.

The Soil and Water Conservation Society has challenged policymakers to make natural resource stewardship one of the most important components of the new farm policy. They recommend rewarding good actors “who have been investing in and implementing conservation systems, often without any governmental assistance or financial compensation” (Cox 2001).

Participants in the SWCS listening sessions felt strongly that current conservation programs often penalize farmers and ranchers who are already good conservationists, as well as penalizing early adopters of new conservation systems and practices (Soil and Water Conservation Society 2001). They want to see a conservation policy that rewards good actors and helps to keep farmers on the lands through conservation.

The Commission on 21st Century Production Agriculture also supports this approach by recommending the establishment of “an incentive-based conservation program (that provides) conservation payments and technical assistance to further encourage the application of locally appropriate conservation practices and technologies that are consistent with crop and livestock activities...” (Commission on 21st Century Production Agriculture 2001). Environmental Defense recommended incentive payments as a means of augmenting farm and ranch income (National Association of Conservation Districts 2001b).

As a panelist at the Leopold Center commented, “Achieving sustainability in agriculture requires more than just changing farm practices. It also includes sustaining those who care for the land” (Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture 1999).

- ◆ Greater awareness of the relationships, and possible contradictory interactions, between production programs and conservation programs.

A commonly held attitude is the belief that unintended conflicts and contradictions among various agricultural and conservation policies has resulted in

negative impacts on the ability of landowners to practice conservation.

Defenders of Wildlife's report, for example, notes that "the issue of consistency between the Title III conservation objectives of the Farm Bill and the objectives of other Titles (for example, commodity and risk management programs) is important in determining how effective resource conservation incentives can be. In some circumstances, other farm legislation may provide disincentives for producers to practice resource conservation" (Defenders of Wildlife 2000).

As a result of a nationwide survey in 1997, the American Farmland Trust recommends a policy audit to identify and eliminate policies and programs that work at cross purposes to good land stewardship (American Farmland Trust Undated). Participants in Soil and Water Conservation workshops also agreed that "agricultural commodity and risk management programs should not exacerbate conservation and environmental problems by encouraging production on environmentally sensitive or fragile land or intensifying agricultural production systems (Soil and Water Conservation Society 2001).

Finally, the Wildlife Management Institute, in its recommendations for the 2002 Farm Bill, proposes linking agricultural support payments to conservation compliance. The Institute maintains that "public monies spent via farm bill programs should be based on comprehensive land stewardship, including wildlife, rather than on commodity production" (Wildlife Management Institute 2001).

◆ Increased capacity for Natural Resources Conservation

Service conservation technical assistance in the field.

All of the policy proposals and program comments reviewed emphasized the need for additional technical support from NRCS, including training and additional staff. To fill this need, they unanimously recommended increased funding for NRCS conservation technical assistance.

The National Drought Policy Commission strongly recommended, "Congress should fund existing drought preparedness programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Technical Assistance Program (Public Law 46) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (16 U.S.C. 3839)..." They also recommended modernization, expansion and coordination of observation technologies such as the Soil Climate Analysis (SCAN) and Snowpack Telemetry (SNOTEL; National Drought Policy Commission 2000).

One of seven recommendations Defenders of Wildlife has proposed for the USDA Conservation Program states that "Federal funding for conservation technical and administrative assistance, agricultural research, and extension should be substantially increased to assist private landowners to meet mandated environmental and ecological standards (Defenders of Wildlife 2000). A similar recommendation can be found in the report of the Wildlife Management Institute (Wildlife Management Institute 2001).

Farmers and ranchers engaged in operations where animal waste is produced are concerned about the availability of NRCS technical specialists to assist in the preparation of Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans and the availability

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of funding support for animal waste structures (National Milk Producers Federation 2000).

- ◆ Program elements that provide a “safe harbor” to producers, with a balance of regulatory and voluntary approaches.

Defenders of Wildlife addresses the concept of “safe harbor” in their recent policy paper. The group suggests that agricultural producers could be afforded a certain level of regulatory security if they integrate a safe harbor program into a resource conservation agreement (Defenders of Wildlife 2000).

Several groups commented on the balance between voluntary and regulatory programs and policies. Based on a survey of farm, ranch and forestland owners, the American Farmland Trust recommends that environmental and land use policies should offer a “fair, effective combination of regulations and incentives, including a dramatic increase in conservation funding and elimination of counterproductive subsidies” (American Farmland Trust Undated).

- ◆ Recognition of the secondary benefits or public goods of agricultural resource conservation.

A final theme in the reports, meetings and papers was the concept of agriculture as a source of societal benefits other than food and fiber as well as the fact that conservation policy often fails to recognize these benefits. Several authors and speakers have pointed out the “multifunctionality” of farming; that is, “farmland that provides environmental, landscape and rural viability benefits in addition to producing food and fiber” (Center for the Study of Rural America 2000). As one author writes, “the farm is still the one link in the agrifood chain accounting for the largest share of agriculture’s public goods, including half the world’s jobs, many of its most vital communities, and many of its most diverse landscapes” (Kirschenmann 2000). Another notes that “other public goods from agriculture might be clean air, reduced global warming, and biodiversity as well as food and feedstuffs (Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture 1999).

The Commission on 21st Century Production Agriculture has acknowledged the importance of agriculture in carbon sequestration by recommending the provision of “appropriate incentives and technical assistance to establish and compensate producers for on-farm carbon sequestration...” (Commission on 21st Century Production Agriculture 2001). Their question is: If agriculture contributes so much to society in general, shouldn’t farmers and ranchers benefit