

Beginning and mid-size Farm Bill analysis: Policy option development and education initiative

Abstract: The needs of beginning mid-size farmers were considered in light of current farm programs and beginning farmer initiatives. Policy options were developed for a new approach to assisting these under-served groups.

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With the barriers to entering farming being significant and opportunities in commodity production shrinking, what are the policy options that can effectively address the needs of beginning farmers and sustainable mid-size farmers and ranchers seeking opportunities through high-value, niche markets (those just beginning as well as those who are beginning again by moving away from conventional systems to a sustainable niche market system)?

This research found a variety of policy options that can assist these farmers seeking to step into farming and establish high-value, niche markets.

Background

The Beginning Farmer Center at Iowa State University and the Center for Rural Affairs in Nebraska looked at policy options to help both beginning farmers and mid-size farmers and ranchers, including those who are beginning again by moving away from conventional systems to an economically sustainable niche market system. They saw a need for this kind of research because farmers today face many challenges with escalating land values, economic consolidation in agriculture, and the aging of the current farm population. There are well-documented opportunities for farmers to take advantage of the rising popularity of niche markets for unique products and foods that command premium prices.

Among the project objectives were to:

- Develop policy options that address the barriers faced by beginning and mid-size farmers in gaining access to land as well as to high-value, niche markets,
- Develop a tool book that will provide farmers with information on programs in the Farm Bill that support niche marketing and aid those who want to transition from conventional to more sustainable farming systems, and
- Educate the public on these policy options and the provisions of the Farm Bill through various communication outlets.

Approach and methods

The investigators analyzed the existing case studies on farming systems that produce high-value, niche market products, and the concurrent policy needs. The result was a report on Giving a Beginner a Chance in the 2007 Farm Bill (www.cfra.org/files/Giving_a_Beginner_A_Chance.pdf), which gained considerable media coverage. The report was shared with members of Congress in face-to-face meetings and discussions, also attended by Iowa beginning and mid-size farmers. During the Farm Bill debate, investigators analyzed proposed pieces of the legislation to assess the impact



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on these groups of farmers. They were able to help the target groups by pointing out some significant flaws that would affect these farmers.

The researchers created a guide on Farm Bill Programs for You and Your Community (www.cfra.org/files/Farm-Bill-Programs-for-You-and-Your-Community.pdf) that explains the 2008 Farm Bill programs that support high-value, niche market production, conservation-based farming systems, and increased access to land and capital. It describes how these programs work and what they can achieve, along with additional resources available. The report was shared with Iowa farmers through a newsletter, media coverage, extension service publicity and liaisons with Iowa farmer organizations. The report's strategies and policy options to help beginning and mid-size farmers were covered in a series of weekly columns written for small-town papers. These were published in Iowa, Minnesota and North Dakota weekly papers.

Op-ed pieces on Farm Bill development, primarily on the negative consequences arising from a lack of commodity program reform, were published in Iowa newspapers, as well as in other farming states. Editorial board visits also helped promote editorials on these topics. Press and media coverage occurred both in Washington, D.C. and in Iowa.

Conclusions

Policy options are needed to help beginning and mid-size farmers and ranchers. Federal policy creates some barriers to the entry and operation of a successful sustainable operation, but agricultural opportunities can be made available to interested farmers with assistance and support from federal agricultural policy and agencies.

For example, one of the biggest challenges for beginning farmers is in gaining access to land because it is so costly. One provision that can assist them with access to land is the Conservation Reserve Program Transition Option. Under this provision, landowners who have land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and are willing to lease or sell that land to a beginning farmer or rancher when the CRP contract expires will receive an additional CRP payment equal to two years' CRP rates. The beginning farmer or rancher must bring that land back into production under an approved conservation plan and get priority consideration in conservation programs to help them establish conservation-based farming systems on that land.

Although the needs of these farmers are many, federal policy can be helpful if it is implemented correctly and with the proper intentions.

Aspects of the project that merit future consideration are the barriers or negative consequences stemming from certain federal agricultural policies. Especially problematic are the barriers to farm entry, such as the access to land and capital. Among the policy options suggested were ways to enhance credit programs for beginning farmers and ranchers. The 2008 Farm Bill had some changes to credit programs, but they were not broad enough to create real improvement for beginners trying to access land and capital.

Impact of results

Information was successfully compiled in useful formats that led to greater awareness and information-sharing with members of Congress and the general public. Having such easily accessible information will assist beginning and mid-size farmers in achieving a more positive future. The products of this project will encourage these family farmers to plug into high-value niche markets and develop conservation-based farming and ranching systems on their property.

From an educational standpoint, the project offered case studies and needed information to help develop policy options to meet the unique needs of beginning and mid-size farmers. The project also facilitated a better understanding of federal farm programs that can support environmental stewardship and new financial opportunities for farmers.

In addition to the guide on Farm Bill opportunities, the Center for Rural Affairs also is currently providing a Farm Bill Helpline to help beginning and mid-size family farmers and ranchers access these programs. Farmers and ranchers can call the Farm Bill Helpline at (402) 687-2100 or use the Internet site at www.cfra.org/sustainable-options-hotline.

Education and outreach

Key elements of the project were public outreach efforts to media, Congress and various farmer groups. These included preparation and release of two reports, news releases, editorials, a press tour, and promotion with farm organizations such as Practical Farmers of Iowa and Iowa Farmers Union.

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***For more information,
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