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FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Farm Bill listening sessions

Abstract: Rural residents share their opinions about current farm policy and prospects for the next federal Farm Bill.

Question & Answer

Q: What do Iowa family farmers want to see in the next Farm Bill?

A: They favor payment caps, increased funding for the Conservation Security program, re-enrollment for the Conservation Reserve Program, fair trade (vs. “free-trade”), and incentives for renewable energy and beginning farmers.

Background

The voices of farmers and rural residents are not always heard in the intense discussions surrounding the passage of a federal farm bill. The Iowa Farmers Union Education Foundation (IFUEF) proposed a series of listening sessions to hear what farmers thought about the present bill and future options.

Project objectives were to:

- Conduct six listening sessions around rural Iowa during February 2006 to gather input from farmers on current agricultural policy and the upcoming federal farm bill,
- Provide farmers with tools and encouragement to contact policy makers and legislators on their own to state their needs and priorities in agricultural policy, and
- Gather and organize input so it can be presented to Iowa policy makers and state and federal legislators for their consideration in development of agricultural policy and legislation.

Approach and methods

Listening sessions occurred in six rural communities: Dyersville, February 2; Colo, February 10; Kensett, February 14; Washington, February 21; Pomeroy, February 23; and Corning, February 27. Meetings were held in the afternoon, locations were public sites such as libraries or community centers. Events were advertised via flyers mailed to Iowa Farmers Union and National Farmers Organization (NFO) members in each area, emails to Practical Farmers of Iowa and Women, Food and Agriculture Network members, as well as ads in county newspapers. Announcements were sent to area television and radio stations, and ISU Extension staff members were asked to help with publicity.

Each session had a facilitator who managed the meeting schedule. There were between 40-50 participants, including the facilitators. Participants received two summaries of the 2002 farm bill; one prepared by the American Farmland Trust and the other from the Community Food Security Coalition. Participants were asked to comment on each of the bill’s 10 titles. They also received a tip sheet on citizen lobbying and contact information for their state and federal legislators.



Listening session at Kensett

Principal Investigator:

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Budget:

\$5,440 for year one

Results and discussion

There was significant agreement among participants at the six sessions on several items. They said:

- The current commodity program favors large, corporate agricultural interests and exploits family farmers.
- Farmers are trapped in the commodity program because prices are too low to make a profit in the marketplace.
- Farmers can't make any money in the current market as independent livestock producers because meat packing corporations own most of the animals and control the market price.
- Most farmers want to be good stewards of the land and water, but the current farm program promotes overproduction and erosion.
- U.S. farmers need protection in the international market, but farmers in developing countries need to make a living.
- Beginning and transitioning farmers need effective assistance with land transfer, financing, and technical help.
- Rural communities need help with water treatment, business retention and expansion, access to nearby health care, and maintenance of fire and emergency services. They need high-speed internet services.
- The farm credit system is unwieldy and does not help producers cover their costs adequately.
- Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) should be fully funded and implemented.
- Value-added grants are useful and should be fully funded.
- The bio-fuels and wind energy industries represent opportunities for farmers if they can control ownership of the processing as well as inputs.

The consensus was that these messages should be conveyed to policy makers by the farmers and rural residents themselves, as well as by Iowa Farmers Union and other advocacy organizations, as debate about the next federal Farm Bill continues. Participants expressed frustration that their concerns were not being heard by legislators, or were being outweighed by the opinions of corporate interests. Rural residents must raise their voices, or Iowa will run the risk, as one participant said, of "becoming the next Appalachia."

Conclusions

Farmers and rural residents who participated in these listening sessions shared many common concerns about their communities and livelihoods in agriculture. They often expressed frustration or anger with policy makers and politicians who were making decisions that affected farmers' lives but appeared to have little knowledge of farming.

Most participants described themselves as independent family farmers, or rural residents who were concerned about air, water, and land quality. Most favored sustainable agriculture. Several were organic farmers. Many appeared to have attended the sessions due to prior knowledge about the Farmers Union or NFO.

As a tool for gathering opinions of rural lowans on the federal farm program, the listening sessions were effective as focus groups rather than as the large community meetings they originally were designed to be. In evaluating the project, organizers felt that the low turnout may reflect the difficulty that people have in understanding this complex piece of legislation and/or their belief that there is little they can do to affect it.

Impact of results

Iowa farmers must be encouraged to take part in the public dialogue about the direction of the next federal Farm Bill. It is hoped that participation in these listening sessions and receiving information about how to contact legislators will lead farmers and rural residents to continue the discussions with one another and with policy makers. Results from these sessions will be disseminated to policy makers for their use.

Education and outreach

The study results were summarized in *Grassroots* newsletter, the bimonthly publication of the IFU and IFUEF, and posted on the IFU web site (www.iafu.org). Participants in the sessions received information about how to contact their legislators and communicate their opinions about the farm bill.

Leveraged funds

No additional funds were leveraged.

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