

Public attitudes

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very much wants to see the conservation of the nation's soil and water resources carried forward. On the other hand, the public believes that the rights of private farmers and landowners must be respected.

The manner in which the public balances these competing claims involves the idea of an equitable distribution of the costs of soil and water conservation between the private farmer or land owner and the government.

Equity in Conservation policy

Mandatory programs which require the farmer to pay for the cost of conservation, exclusively, are viewed as fair to both partners by only a tiny segment of the public (12 percent). Consequently, only 4 percent of the public views this as the best approach to set a national soil and water conservation program.

On the other hand, a mandatory program involving loans and other financial help is viewed as fair to both partners by 56 percent of the American people; 26 percent see this approach as the best way to assure that the goals of a soil and water conservation program are met, ranking it second out of the eight approaches tested.

Support is almost as strong for a third mandatory program, one in which farmers and landowners who did not protect their soil and water would lose other help they now get from the government for their farms. This approach was judged to be fair to both partners by forty-one percent of the public, but only fourteen percent said they favored

this approach over the other seven.

A program of loans and other financial help to farmers who volunteered to protect their water and soil, on the other hand, is viewed as fair to both partners by seventy-one percent of the public. Likewise, this approach is favored over the others as the best way to attain soil conservation goals by thirty-five percent of the public, ranking it first of the eight approaches tested. This represents the present cost-sharing program.

Voluntary conservation programs that would provide financial help to the farmer that need not be repaid are viewed as fair to both partners by only twenty-three percent of the public. Hence, just ten percent favor this approach to conservation as the best of the eight examined.

Financial bonuses to farmers and other landowners who voluntarily take good care of their soil, but none to those who don't, is judged as fair to both partners by forty-two percent of the public, but only nineteen percent select this approach as the best way to go.

Farmers and other landowners who take good care of their land would be permitted to pay lower taxes than those who don't by the forty-one percent who judged this approach to financing the equities of a soil and water conservation program as fair to both partners. Yet, just nineteen percent saw this approach as the best of the eight for assuring that soil and water conservation goals are met.

One-third of the public said

it would be fair to both partners if the government provided information and advice but no financial help to protect these resources. A similarly large group, twenty-nine percent, saw this approach as fair to neither partner. Only ten percent selected this approach as their most-favored. Though seen as inexpensive, this strategy is regarded as not likely to be effective.

Public priorities for federal spending

By more than five to one the public feels that it is proper for the federal government to grant money to farmers and other landowners so that they can protect soil and water. (78-14 percent).

In terms of six major related problems, the clear preference of the public in federal spending is for programs that increase the supply food, lumber and clothing, for which they allocate \$24.40 out of every \$100 available federal dollars; increasing the supply of crops and farm wastes to produce energy receives \$18.30; increasing the water supply, \$17.10; improving water quality, \$14.60; protecting fish and wildlife habitats, \$13.30; and, reducing the damage caused by floods, \$12.70.

Expectedly, farmers would allocate substantially more federal support to increasing agricultural products for both consumption and energy production than would the general public.

The farm owner or manager would allocate \$30 to increase food, lumber and clothing, compared to \$24.40 in the general public.

The farm owner or manager would allocate \$25.00 to increase the supply of crops and farm wastes to produce energy compared to

the \$18.30 allocated by the general public.

The public accepts "need" as an important criteria in the allocation of soil conservation money to farmers and landowners, but need is not perceived as an entitlement.

Two out of three people (68 percent) feel that financial need should be a criteria for who should receive governmental assistance.

On the other hand, a substantial majority (59 percent) feel that only those farmers who agree to practice specific soil and water conservation measures for ten years should get financial assistance.

By 69-21 percent, the public does not favor targeting financial help only to farmers in high-erosion areas, but rather supports the idea of providing financial help to farmers with erosion problems regardless of where they live.

Public attitudes toward agriculture

Overall, the American people have a good grasp of the realities of contemporary American agriculture. They support the concept of the small, family farm and federal policies aimed at preserving and increasing the number of small family farms in this country.

On the other hand, the public supports the continuation of a production-based, rather than a needs-based subsidy system.

A majority of the American people understand the fundamental issues in modern American agriculture:

—by 72-22 percent they agree that most years farmers have a difficult time making enough money to stay in business.

—by 67-22 percent they

agree that almost all new farmers are the children of farmers.

—by 51-33 percent they recognize that most of the food in this country is not grown on smaller, family farms.

A sizable majority (60 percent) of the public feels that we should be moving towards a country which has a relatively large number of small farms, while just 19 percent feel we should be moving toward a country which has a relatively small number of large farms.

The public supports new federal controls on farmland ownership to increase the number of small farmers in the country, 67-19 percent. Farm owners and managers take this position by 62-27 percent.

Despite this support for the concept of the small

farm, the public does not limit its support for agriculture to small farms. By 51-33 percent they recognize that most food is grown on large farms. Almost half (48 percent) believe that all farmers, large and small, should get financial help for soil erosion problems.

Overall, a 45 percent plurality favor continuation of the production-based subsidy system, compared to 37 percent who favor a needs-based subsidy system.

Public Views

of decision-making

The American people report a relatively low level of participation in the decision-making processes. Only one in three people recall having ever personally done anything to try

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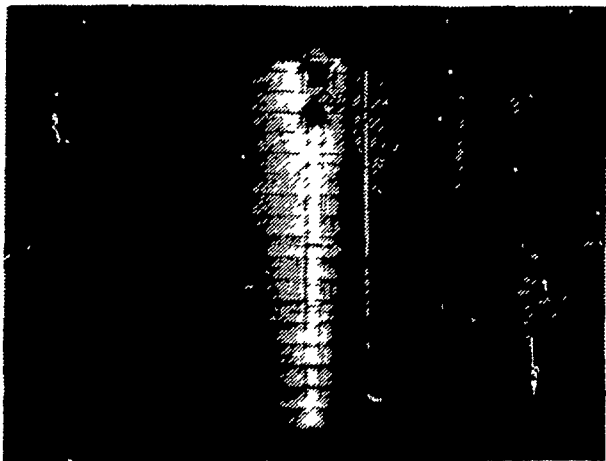
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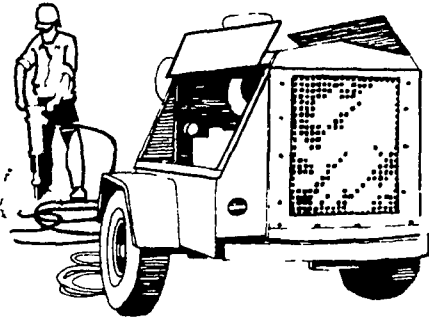
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