

Symposium Explores Ag, Environment Connection

NEWARK, Del. — Since the 1970s, public concern over environmental issues in the United States has grown steadily. Efforts to protect the nation's natural resources — especially water — first focused on industrial pollution. Today farming practices which affect water quality are also coming under close scrutiny.

The result of this scrutiny could well be more legislation aimed directly at agriculture. But for environmental controls to be effective, many questions must be answered, economist Dr. Sandra S. Batie told a roomful of soil scientists and agronomists during a recent symposium at the University of Delaware on "Building a Stronger Agriculture in a Quality Environment."

The symposium was part of the annual meeting of the Northeastern Branch of the American Society of Agronomy, hosted this year by members of the university's department of plant science. It focused on current public attitudes toward agriculture and the environment, and the challenge farmers face to produce food profitably while managing fer-

tilizers, livestock manure and pesticides in ways which protect water quality.

The speakers described research being conducted — as well as other research needed — to help farmers meet this challenge. One report also discussed progress being made in developing non-agricultural uses for recycled urban waste.

Batie, a resource economist at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, is currently on leave to study the impact of environmental trends on agricultural policy in Washington, D.C. She set the stage for the morning's discussion by explaining how concern for the environment is changing public attitudes toward farming and how this could affect farmers.

"Traditional natural resource programs in the United States were born as responses to the need for relief, recover and reform in the agricultural sector during the Great Depression," Batie said. Before the rise of the environmental movement, public policy was more favorable to agriculture. People had closer ties

to farming, as well as greater faith in science and technology. This led to strong public support of agriculture, including research and subsidized resources (such as irrigation water). Since the 1970s, these attitudes and the programs they support have been increasingly challenged.

This trend has significant implications for policy makers, policy analysts and researchers, the economist said. "The public now sees agriculture as part of the problem." The farm bill of 1985, with its provisions to protect swamp, marsh and highly erodible land, is the most recent example of this changing attitude. Batie pointed out that the key designers of those three provisions belong to a new group of lobbyists — an environmental coalition with no involvement in agriculture, though each lobby within the group now has an agricultural expert on its team.

Changing public attitudes are also influencing the probable management of groundwater sources, Batie said. "Agriculture, while not the main contributor to groundwater pollution, is,

nonetheless, a significant source of contaminants. The public has recognized the need to protect groundwater purity in the 1972 amendments to the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, and the Resources Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976, among others."

There is no indication controls will be eased. More than half the U.S. population depends on groundwater for drinking. The economist cited a recent Harris poll which shows strong public support for legislation to protect groundwater quality. Ninety-three percent of the respondents were opposed to easing water quality restrictions. Sixty-five percent of those polled said they were against relaxing standards for drinking water quality, regardless of the cost.

When Batie discussed the poll with Harris, she said he predicted environmental issues would be a "real sleeper" in upcoming elections. "The public has consistently indicated increasing support for protection of environmental quality, while concern with farmers' welfare has lost its

prior dominance," the economist warned.

"Recent political trends indicate that, despite existing federal authority to take an active role in water management, primary responsibility for monitoring and managing groundwater pollution will likely rest with state governments," she added. "Bills currently under consideration at the federal level would mandate that states establish their own standards for groundwater quality and regulate uncontrolled sources of contamination." Twenty-eight states already have such legislation.

For all the strength of popular feeling, Batie said there is a lack of public sophistication on water quality issues. "For example, there is little awareness of the difference between industrial and agricultural sources of pollution." The economist expressed concern that public fears could quickly lead to the banning of pesticides.

"If only a few pesticides were banned, food prices and farmer incomes could rise," Batie said. "But if all pesticides were banned, farm income would fall." Considering the plight of American farmers if this were to happen, she said she could "easily envisage legislation to ban pesticides, and at the same time, legislation to help support farm incomes."

Predicting increased state involvement in groundwater contamination issues, the economist pointed out that if such efforts were not coordinated, this could lead to problems in interstate commerce. Farmers would also encounter marketing problems if large companies took a stand against products on which certain pesticides had been used.

Batie stressed the need for more research-based information, as environmental policies are developed which affect agriculture. This includes determining health-based pesticide limits and developing inexpensive testing and screening tools, systematic monitoring programs, and improved models of pesticide behavior in the environment. Information is also needed to develop environmentally sound crop management practices. Substitutes for certain agricultural chemicals and effective cleanup methods are also needed.

"It's been my experience," said Batie, "that the questions must be raised before action is taken. The present public concern over groundwater quality is sincere; there is a strong need for research in this area."

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