

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

Rural policy is umbrella for a number of specific policies

As suggested in an earlier column, many view farm subsidies as filling a general policy need to provide outside financial support for declining rural areas. For them farm subsidies and rural aid are one in the same thing. What is lost is the concept that farm price and income policy is but one element in the broader arena of rural policy. As a result some of those who blur the distinction between the two are more than happy to fill in the “void” as they perceive it by providing an alternative, and to them more pressing, criteria for distributing the money.

In a practical sense, this confusion is understandable given the fact that recent farm bills deal not only with farm policy issues (commodities, livestock, dairy, poultry, fruits and vegetables, and the list goes on) but non-farm issues as well (food stamps, rural housing, rural economic development, rural electrification, high speed internet services, etc.). Rural public policies are concerned with issues that arise out of meeting the needs of areas of relatively sparse population. These sparsely populated rural areas may range from farmland nestled up against major metropolitan areas to mining communities in the Rockies to resort communities in the north woods. Rural public policies deal with the needs of all of these areas and include elements like farm policy, natural resource policy, and economic development policy among others.

Each of these major policy elements can then be subdivided into additional policy elements. What is crucial to remember about all of these is that each policy element arises because of a specific problem that someone believes needs to be addressed by the larger body politic. In each case the problem is specific, and thus the policy prescription is specific as well.

As we talk about moving federal budget dollars around, we need to keep in mind that monies targeted to farm commodity programs may be no more interchangeable with funds designated for rural economic development than insulin is with antibiotics. We need to understand the need for each.

I would argue that before we talk about moving farm bill monies around, we need to take a moment and ask ourselves, “What is the problem that each policy prescription is designed to solve?” We need to be as careful about this process as the physician is in distinguishing between a diabetic and a person with a lung infection.

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