

Policy Pennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

## Policy development begins with an understanding of the problem to be solved

In this column I want to identify four of the more commonly talked about elements of rural public policy. Obviously this short list is not exhaustive, but can serve to illustrate what I have been talking about in previous columns.

It will come as no surprise to regular readers of this column that the first element of rural policy that I want to identify is commodity policy for the major crops. Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture and then Vice President under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was one of the first persons to identify the fact that crop agriculture's ability to produce a surplus and the inability to manage that production is at the core of the crop farmer's price and income problems.

The next element of rural policy is the one that is often first in the minds of farm advocates and legislators. Most often discussions of farm policy begin with a plea to save the family farm. Since the beginning of this country the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer, engaged in wresting a livelihood from the land, has served as the central element of the American democratic vision. There are a number of reasons that have been espoused as part of the rationale to save the family farm, but in large they are distinct from the price/income problem of crop agriculture.

Soil conservation and concern for the environment are other elements of rural policy. By the turn of the century and certainly by the dust bowl days of the 1930's as brown clouds rolled out of the Midwest and across eastern seaboard states it became apparent that America could no longer afford an agriculture where farmers mined the soil and then left for more fertile parts when the soil gave out or washed or blew away. Since then concern for groundwater purity and wildlife preservation have expanded the concern for soil conservation into a wider concern for the whole environment.

Another element is rural economic development. In many ways this is a recent concern and in other ways it is as old as the republic. Rural economic development policies have been as diverse as the various Homestead Acts, grants to railroads to open up the grain belt, reclamation projects in the far west, and rural electrification among others. Today the concern is often centered on developing and maintaining vital rural communities that can provide jobs so that these communities can provide attractive employment opportunities for a greater portion of their youth than in the past.

Each time the farm bill comes up for consideration, much of the argument centers around the concern for preserving the family farm. Certainly commodity policy will affect the economic viability of family farms, but the two issues are not the same. The same is true for conservation, environmental, rural development, rural health care, rural transportation and an endless number of other policies. The critical factors that bring these issues to the fore vary from one to another.

I would argue that a wise rural policy would first identify the underlying rationale for each policy element. From that rationale, policy objectives should then be developed. Once this work is done one can then go about the work of developing policy proposals and identifying how the policy proposals for one element interact with all the others. Starting the other way around will only lead to confusion, frustration and ultimately higher costs, both economically and socially.

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Originally published in *MidAmerica Farmer Grower*, Vol. 21, No. 10, March 5, 2004  
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