

## PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray &amp; Harwood D. Schaffer

## Adjusting farm policy in light of changing societal concerns

Over the last three weeks, we have been noting basic concepts that we think need to be a part of a defensible farm policy. The first three characteristics of farm policy were environmental sustainability, human physical sustainability, and economic sustainability. To that triad, we want to add a fourth: political sustainability.

Secretary of Agriculture touched on that issue late last year when he talked about the shrinking rural population as one reason for the failure of Congress to adopt a farm bill before he spoke to the 2012 Farm Journal Forum in early December.

When the first of the modern farm bills was adopted three-quarters of a century ago, the majority of the population either lived in rural areas or was one generation away from the farm. The issues that faced farmers were familiar to most voters.

Today, farmers constitute less than 2 percent of the nation's population and rural residents are dwindling in number as the nation becomes more urban. Farmers can no longer depend on voters who have any understanding of animal husbandry or the nature of crop production.

In today's changing demographics, it takes more than the traditional "farm block" to pass a farm bill. To start with, support for farm legislation will dwindle rapidly if farmers are seen as defending the indefensible.

We have seen stories of activists who get hired to work in a concentrated feeding operation so they can take videos of acts they consider to constitute inhumane treatment of animals. When farmers work with state legislatures to pass legislation to make it a crime to take such videos, the general public rightly begins to wonder what farmers have to hide.

A far better strategy is for the farm community to openly explain normal animal raising practices using whatever means are available. If practices that have no place in a normal farming operation appear in videos or otherwise become evident, then farmers and farm supporters need to speak out and join in the call to end the abuse.

We live in a world in which values are changing, and when it comes to the treatment of animals, some activities that were once commonplace are increasingly being seen as unacceptable. And this change in values affects more than farmers, as the world of show dogs and horse racing can attest. Farmers need to keep up

with these changing values and make appropriate adjustments to their animal handling practices if they want to retain the public's trust and support.

In a period of tight federal budgets, we find it hard to defend direct payments when net farm income is projected to be at near record levels. As we said last week, farmers need to be protected against real losses. But spending money on programs that provide extra income when prices are high and offer ineffective support when farmers face real financial threats makes no sense. It is possible to provide defensible support to the nation's crop farmers at a much lower cost than the federal government faces under current legislation.

In addition, a defensible farm bill has to make sense to a wide range of voters and has to take their concerns into account as it meets the very real needs of working farmers. For some of these voters, their primary concerns are for the environment whether that means reducing the release of carbon dioxide from fossil fuels, or keeping farm chemicals out of the aquifer.

Other voters view farm legislation from their perspective as consumers. They want to make sure that their food does not contain residues of chemicals that were used in its production. At the same time they do not want to be exposed to bacterial matter that can send them to the emergency room.

Other voters are focused on the issue of hunger and seeing to it that the poor of society have access to an adequate supply of nutritious foods.

And quite frankly, a large number of voters are concerned about all three.

When we step back it becomes clear that the four areas of sustainability that we have been talking about are interrelated. Paying attention to them would provide a good starting point in the development of a defensible farm bill—a farm bill that would attract support well beyond the 2 percent of the population who earn their living as farmers.

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