



PUBLIC OPINION ON FEDERAL AGRICULTURE POLICY & CONSERVATION

«HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2011 SURVEY ON AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT»

Conducted for The David & Lucile Packard Foundation



Background and Summary of Findings

In July 2011, Benenson Strategy Group and Voter Consumer Research conducted the third annual survey on behalf of The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.¹ This memo includes findings from the 2011 survey of the American public regarding federal agriculture policy and the environment.

This year's annual survey had several goals. One was to understand how Americans view U.S. agriculture policy and especially the role of conservation in the Farm Bill, which faces reauthorization next year. Our survey shows most Americans support conservation efforts. More than two-thirds say conservation should be an important goal of national agriculture policy -- particularly clean water protection and soil and clean farming practices -- which drives their support for conservation-oriented reforms. Americans value conservation programs with environmental benefits more than programs with economic benefits such as job creation or recreation dollars.

A second goal of this year's survey was to see where spending on conservation priorities fit within the overall budget debate. While the budget deficit and national debt are a concern, Americans still place a high priority on spending for pro-conservation policies and agree that these policies can save money in the long run. Nearly three in five adults (57%) are opposed to cutting conservation programs because they save money by preventing pollution, compared to 40% who support cutting them to reduce the deficit now. When we gave respondents a list of potential areas of farm support that could be cut to help shrink the deficit, conservation of land and water on farms and nutrition were the programs they wanted to cut the least.

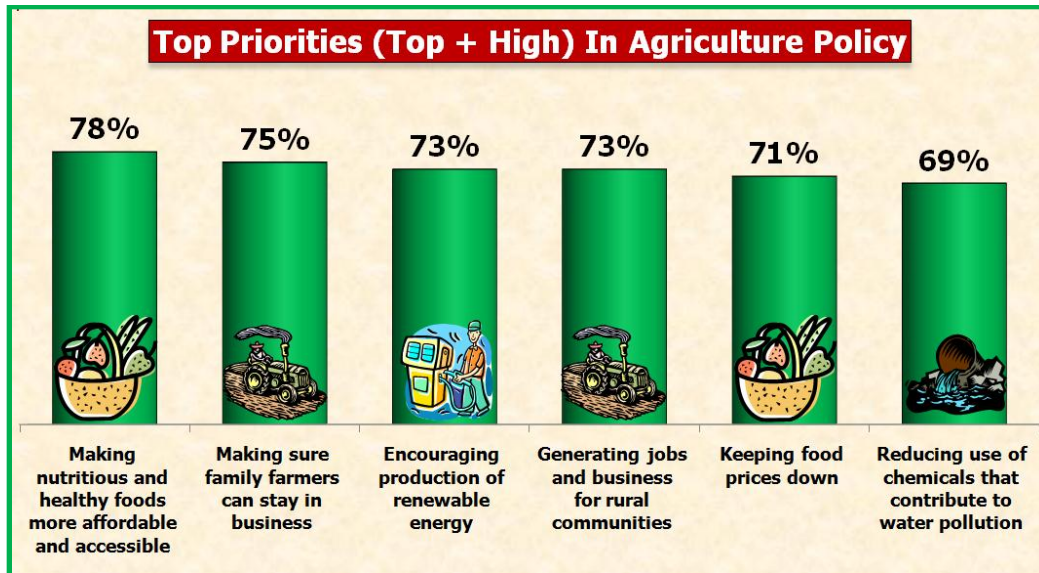
Americans also support pro-conservation reforms in existing agriculture subsidies and policies, particularly when those reforms are designed as long-term solutions that save money. Americans believe the federal government should prioritize conservation spending that addresses specific environmental needs as opposed to the current system which uses various formulas to distribute conservation funds broadly. In addition, they favor establishing requirements that recipients of subsidies meet environmental standards to receive subsidy payments and subsidized crop insurance.

Food issues show up as priorities when Americans are asked about goals for agriculture policy, important outcomes of farm subsidy policies and as concerns for biofuels production. Americans want farm subsidies to result in the production of more fresh fruits and vegetables and more local and regional food sources. They also want to protect family farmers; throughout the survey, Americans said helping family farmers stay in business should be a priority in agriculture policy (75% top or high priority) and a top goal of subsidy programs (31% most important outcome). Advocates should tap into Americans long term view of the cost of farm programs and their core concerns about food by framing conservation to remind them that conservation ensures the country has healthy farms (by protecting family farmers), healthy food (decreasing pesticide and fertilizer use), and healthy families (increasing access to healthy and affordable foods).

¹ Results based on a nationwide survey of 1,200 total interviews with adults. The interviews were conducted July 7-11, 2011. The margin of error for overall results is $\pm 2.83\%$ and higher among subgroups.

Conservation Programs Are Important Priorities In The Next Farm Bill

Americans see several conservation-related goals as important components of agriculture policy. While making healthy food more affordable and available is the most important goal of the Farm Bill, conservation-related goals such as clean energy, clean water, and clean farming practices are a top or high priority for more than two-thirds of Americans.



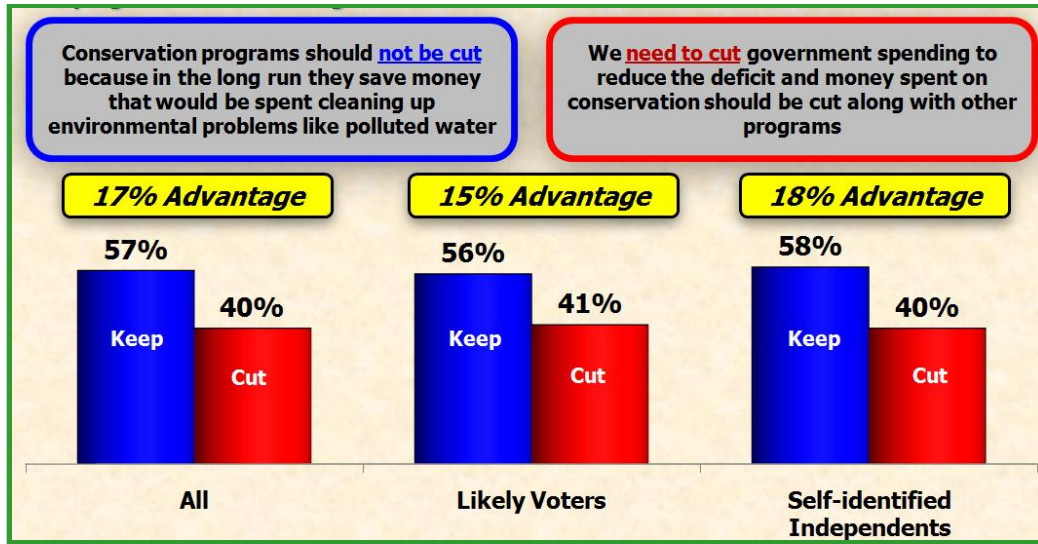
Q: Would you say this is a top priority, high priority, middle priority, low priority, or not at all a priority when the government makes policies that affect agriculture?

**Note: only top six priorities included*

In addition, the survey found that Americans tend to be more receptive to simple language than program jargon. For example, “help farmers take good care of their land and water” tested significantly better than “encouraging conservation-oriented farming practices.”

Long Term Benefits of Conservation Are More Important Than Reducing The Deficit

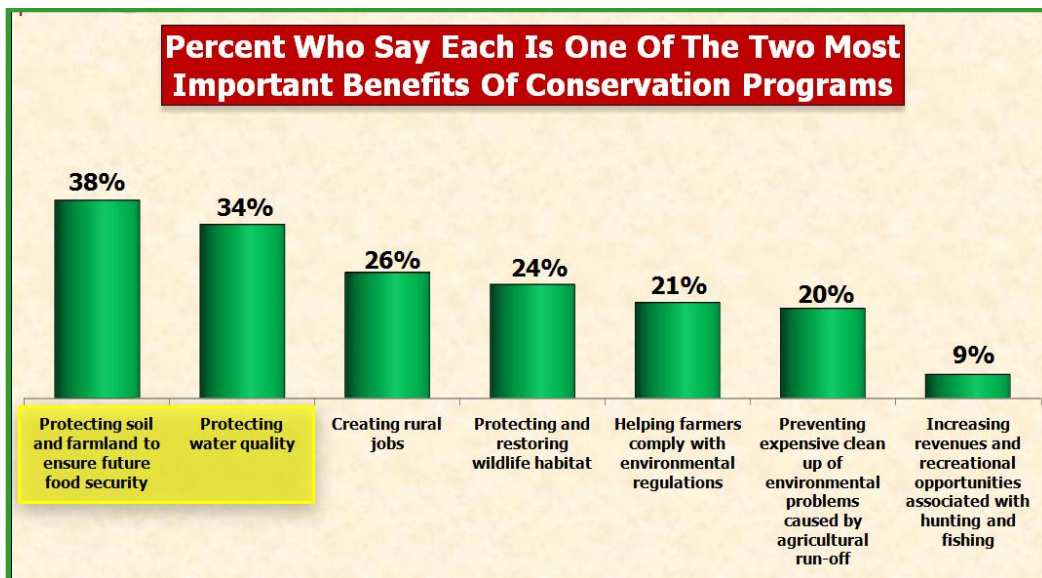
Reducing the deficit is a top concern for many. However, our poll found a majority of Americans do not favor cutting conservation programs that prevent pollution and other environmental problems because these programs save money in the long run. Further, two key groups, likely voters and self-identified Independents (especially important in the upcoming 2012 elections), support keeping conservation programs in place. Therefore, emphasizing the long-term savings of conservation programs will help maintain public support in the face of pressure to cut the federal budget.



Best Benefits of Conservation Programs: Long-Term Protection

Long-term interests also animate Americans’ positive views of Farm Bill conservation programs. When asked about the benefits of conservation programs, Americans say protecting soil and farmland to ensure future food security and protecting water quality are the top positive benefits – even more important than economic benefits such as job creation or recreation and tourism income.

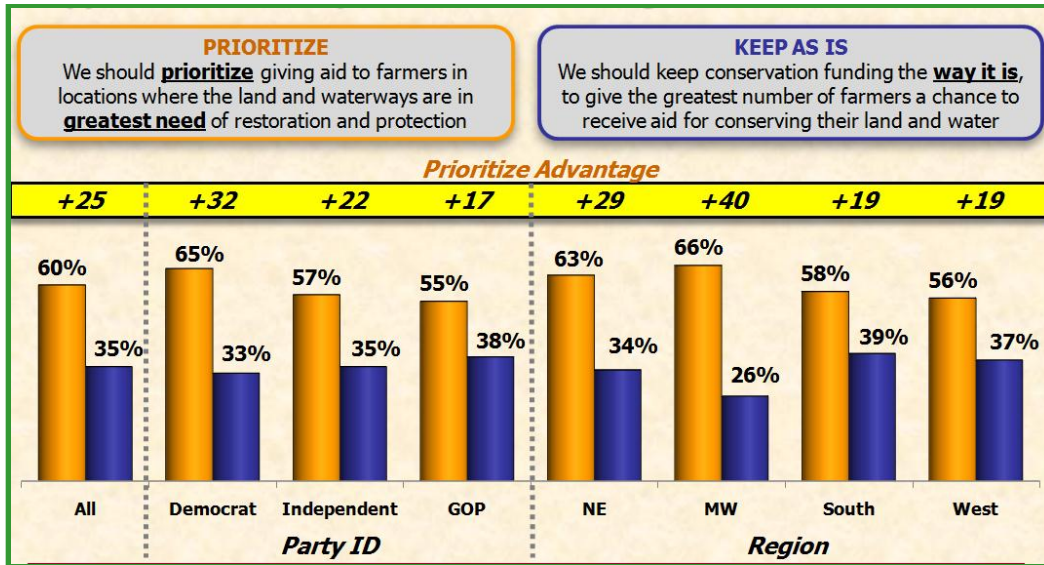
Here again, the poll shows the importance of using simple terms and placing an emphasis on describing goals rather than programs when talking about conservation programs. As the table below shows, “protecting water quality” has a 14% advantage in importance over “preventing expensive clean up of environmental problems caused by agricultural run-off.”



Q: The Farm Bill funds conservation programs that pay farmers to protect water quality, soil and wildlife habitat on their land. Which two of the following would you say are the most important benefits of the conservation programs contained in the Farm Bill?

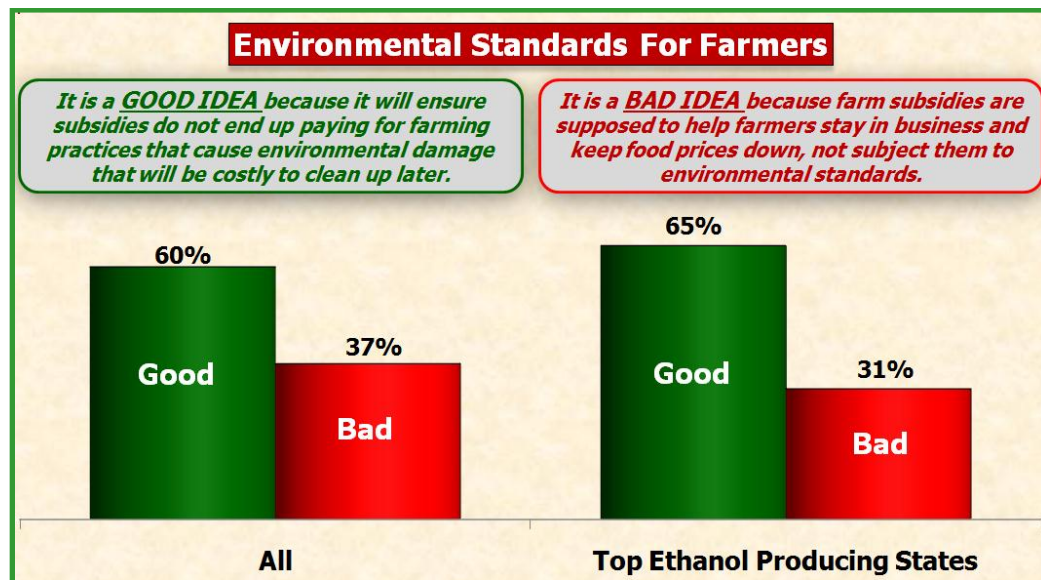
Reforming Agriculture Policy Programs: Prioritize Funding and Make Conservation-Oriented

Americans are open to reforming existing subsidy formulas to enhance conservation efforts, with 60% supporting prioritizing funding for areas of greatest need over keeping the system as is (35%) so the funding is distributed broadly by a geographic formula. In fact, this approach wins with double-digit margins across party lines and across all regions of the country.



Q: Currently, the majority of conservation funding is spread across the country based on a federal formula that gives farmers access to conservation programs. Which is closer to your view of how farm conservation funding should be distributed?

By a greater than three-to-two margin, Americans support reforms that ask farmers receiving subsidies and subsidized crop insurance to meet standards for water quality and soil health. Here again, introducing long-term benefits to the message appears to be important to support. While food costs are an important overall concern, most Americans still prefer that attention be paid to long-term savings. Even adults residing in the six biggest ethanol producing states (Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, Minnesota, South Dakota and Indiana) support establishing environmental standards for farmers by double-digit margins.



Q: Some say that in order to receive subsidy payments and subsidized crop insurance, farmers should meet certain environmental standards such as protecting water quality or soil health. Which is closer to your view of this?



Conclusion

Most Americans support conservation efforts as part of an agricultural policy that also provides for nutritious food and strong family farms. They support these efforts despite concerns about the deficit. Going forward, advocates should emphasize the fact that these programs will save money in the long run by preventing damage that results in having to spend money on expensive cleanups. We also saw that simple language tests much better than programmatic jargon. Advocates should therefore eliminate "Washington D.C.-speak" from their vocabulary when talking about agricultural reforms.

Background of Project Team

The bi-partisan research team of Benenson Strategy Group and Voter Consumer Research were chosen to conduct this year's survey on behalf of The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. The project was managed by Jen Lamson of Pathfinder Network in coordination with Resource Media. Please contact Jen Lamson at jenlamson@gmail.com or (206) 369-3122 for further questions.

Benenson Strategy Group

The Benenson Strategy Group is a globally recognized strategic research and consulting firm. Founded in 2000, BSG has worked for heads of state, governors, members of Congress, international labor unions, Fortune 100 companies and major nonprofits all together working on six continents and in more than 60 countries. Some of BSG's clients include President Barack Obama, Governor Tim Kaine, AFL-CIO, SEIU, and Third Way. Peter Brodnitz, who conducted this survey on behalf of BSG, was named "Pollster of the Year" by the American Association of Political Consultants in 2007.

Voter Consumer Research

Voter / Consumer Research is a public opinion research firm specializing in the analysis of voter attitudes towards public policy and political issues. It specializes in corporate issues management, initiative and referendum campaigns and political campaigns. Its clients include 2 of the top 5 Fortune 100 companies, industry associations, and elected public officials including former President George W. Bush and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell. The firm was founded in 1991 and has offices in Washington, D.C and Houston, TX.