

Selected Texas Agricultural Commodity Board Members' Perceptions of the
2002 U.S. Farm Bill

Christa L. Catchings¹

Gary J. Wingenbach²

Texas A&M University
Department of Agricultural Education
2116 TAMU
College Station, Texas 77843-2116

Phone: 979-862-1507

FAX: 979-845-6296

Email: ccatchings@aged.tamu.edu

g-wingenbach@tamu.edu

¹ Christa Catchings is a graduate research assistant in the Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University.

² Gary J. Wingenbach is an assistant professor of agricultural communications and journalism in the Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University.

Abstract

Cooperative Extension Service personnel play a major role in educating the public about U.S. Farm Bills. The purpose of this study was to determine selected Texas agricultural commodity board members' perceptions of the 2002 U.S. Farm Bill. Board members representing the Texas Corn Growers, Cotton Growers, Grain Sorghum Producers, and Wheat Producers Associations responded. Respondents ($N = 50$) were mostly male, represented a cotton growers association, and were 46 to 55 years old. Respondents ranked farm commodity programs, disaster assistance, and international trade as the most important 2002 Farm Bill programs. Respondents strongly agreed that their respective organizations influenced the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill. Extension/University and Internet were rated as good information sources to learn about the farm bill. Cotton association board members perceived organizational influencers had more, and corn board members perceived organizational influencers had less effect on the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill.

Additional research is needed to determine if agricultural commodity board members used the Internet to access agricultural policy information from Extension service and/or university-based Web sites. Continued work in gathering agricultural commodity board and organization members' input will be beneficial to policy makers as new farm bills are crafted, debated, enacted, and implemented. Equally, agricultural commodity board and organization members' perceptions about farm bill educational materials developed by agricultural communications professionals and/or Cooperative Extension Service personnel will improve the processes for educating the public about the 2002 U.S. Farm Bill.

Keywords: Communications, U.S. Farm Bill, Agricultural Commodity Boards, Texas, Extension

Introduction

When the U.S Farm Bill is being formed, state-level agricultural commodity board members consider the advice of national and congressional leaders and lobbyists working on their behalf. State-level agricultural commodity group members' perceptions may be influenced by this advice. Several questions may be derived from this observation. Do state-level agricultural commodity board members perceive their organization's U.S. Farm Bill interests from a local or national perspective? What issues, if any, in the U.S. Farm Bill are most important to agricultural commodity group board members? Do they communicate their commodity group's farm bill interests to local members in an unbiased manner?

Conceptual Framework

The U.S. government's role in farm policy changes every six years. During the initial debates and policy formation processes, national commodity board members and congressional leaders create the farm bill provisions, which affect agricultural producers nationwide. Current and future leaders of agricultural organizations may not have the abilities to assess accurately their member's contributions to the farm bill. Researchers (Mark, Daniel & Parcell, 2002) found producers' and non-producers' needs and perceptions of farm bill provisions useful to policy makers in the development of the 2002 Farm Bill. Most commodity organizations make valid attempts to provide input to the farm bill, but research is vague regarding the value of this input (Sulak, 2000).

During the 1930s, when farm commodity programs started, farm organizations began losing political influence (Sulak, 2000). The loss of political influence was caused by commodity legislation directly impacting particular groups (Bockstael & Just, 1991). Agricultural organizations play an integral role in farm policy enactment and implementation. For the past

70+ years, farm policy makers have treated agricultural organizations as mediums of information and communication. Farm organizations tend to emphasize economic issues and the general farm program framework (Morrison, 1970). In the past, most agricultural committees were concerned with world trade, competition in the world market, and efforts to reduce the influence of the government in farm programs (Westcott, Young, & Price, 2002). U.S. agricultural policy has focused on distribution of the nation's vast land resources, increasing the productivity and standard of living of American farmers, and assisting farmers in marketing their product (Westcott, Young, & Price, 2002). Many farm policies have helped reduce federal involvement, while increasing programs that were geared toward market orientation in the agricultural sector (Young & Westcott, 1996).

The 2002 Farm Bill, "The Farm Security and Rural Investment (FSRI) Act of 2002," was the most argued piece of legislation in the USDA's history. The scope and complexity of the new farm legislation suggests that the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and other USDA agencies have a large task of creating regulations to implement FSRI, while educating producers of the provisions, alternatives, and benefits available to them (Mark, Daniel, & Parcell, 2002). The House Agriculture Committee held several hearings allowing commodity groups to present specific recommendations for the new farm bill. Most recommendations raised were similar to those of found in previous farm bills. The recommendations included enhancing risk management, assurance in income safety nets for producers, improvements in the agriculture trading sector, and assisting smaller and limited-resource farms.

Sulak (2000) found national agricultural commodity organization leaders deemed commodity programs as the most important provision in the 1996 FAIR Farm Bill. The same 26 leaders believed international trade programs were the second most important provision. Sulak

noted that agricultural commodity board leaders should be, but were not, concerned about environmental and international trade programs. Respondents believed their respective organization's members were pleased with the FAIR Farm Bill. Also, leaders perceived that the Agriculture Committee Chairs and congressional leadership influenced the 1996 Farm Bill formation process most, while the Clinton Administration influenced it the least. Sulak concluded that national agricultural commodity organizations had little or no influence on the final outcome of the 1996 Farm Bill. Sulak stated that depending on the particular commodity, support or opposition of the farm bill varied.

Sulak's (2000) study indicated a need for agricultural organizations to join coalitions to gain strength in influencing agricultural policy development. She recommended additional research to understand agricultural commodity organizations leaders' and members' needs in future farm bills. An understanding of their needs may help determine strengths and weaknesses of an organization's role in agricultural policy development. Educators and land-grant universities play an important role in providing options/assistance to producers while new farm bills are being formed.

Mark, Daniel, and Parcell (2002) studied Kansas producers and agribusiness professionals' perceptions of the changes in agricultural policy from 1996 to 2000. The study showed changes occurred in producers' perceptions of federal agricultural policy, fostering immediate interest in the FAIR Act's impacts on farm income, income variability, land values, and crop acreage mixes. In this study, Kansas producers' perceptions were generally favorable toward the FAIR Act. The results showed producers' and non-producers' perceptions of FSRI were useful to policy makers and agricultural interest groups preparing FSRI 2002. The authors reported that "decision to retain elements of previous farm programs, with modification, in the

2002 farm program was based, as least partially, on producer preferences for those elements and their perception of how they would benefit from the program as their operations changed in the future” (pg. 3). Even though the researchers used small and nonrandom samples, the producer information regarding farm policy can be useful to policy makers evaluating differences in policy impacts for farming operations of various sizes or geographic location.

Mark, Daniel, and Parcell (2002) noted that because farm policy is created with consideration given to producers’ and agribusiness persons’ perceptions, it is important to gather such information. This information could be used by policymakers to help create future farm bills that better fit what producers and agribusiness people need, while monitoring how well the current farm bill meets their needs. Cooperative Extension Service personnel are often in good position to help gather this information. Additional efforts are needed in gathering consumers’ perceptions of agricultural policy in the future.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to assess selected agricultural commodity board members’ (Texas Grain Sorghum, Corn, Wheat and Cotton Associations) perceptions of the 2002 U.S. Farm Bill. The following objectives guided this study.

1. Determine the most important producer programs in the 2002 Farm Bill.
2. Describe organizational support of the primary issues in the 2002 Farm Bill.
3. Determine organizational influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill.
4. Describe the sources of information for understanding the 2002 Farm Bill.
5. Determine if relationships existed between respondents’ perceptions and selected demographic variables.

Methods

A descriptive survey design was employed in this study. The target population was all Texas agricultural commodity board members representing the Corn Producers, Cotton Growers, Grain Sorghum, and Wheat Producers Associations. The target population ($N = 256$) represented the major Texas agricultural commodity groups who had a vested interest in the 2002 Farm Bill. The accessible population was considerably less ($n = 100$), due to commodity boards' privacy concerns about the release of their members' personal information.

A stratified-random sample ($n = 80$) was used to elicit respondents' participation in the study. Kumar (1999) stated a stratified-random sampling method reduces the heterogeneity in a population. Basically, a stratified-random sample ensures that groups in the population are adequately represented (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Questionnaires, cover letters, and return envelopes were sent to commodity board directors in mid-fall 2002, with instructions to distribute, collect, and return the instruments after their annual winter board meetings. Only one response was collected from the grain sorghum association, thereby eliminating or severely limiting their inclusion in this study. A 63% response rate was attained from corn, cotton, wheat, and grain sorghum commodity board members. Despite repeated and unsuccessful follow-up procedures to non-respondents, caution is warranted against generalizing the results of this study beyond the accessible population.

A modified version of Sulak's (2000) 1996 Farm Bill Survey was used to collect the data. The survey instrument contained a total of 20 questions with multiple parts to each question. Producer program importance was measured using a rank order list of six major programs (farm commodity programs; conservation, environment and water quality programs; disaster assistance programs/crop insurance; international trade programs; foreign food aid programs; and

promotion programs/check-off) in the 2002 Farm Bill. Organizational support of the primary issues was measured using an inventory (opposed, neutral, or support) on nine issues (target prices; decoupled payments planting flexibility; marketing loans; non-recourse loans; crop insurance; payment limitations; conservation compliance requirements; wetland protection; and environmental quality incentive program) in the farm bill. Organizational influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill were measured using a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree...4 = strongly agree). The value of commodity board members' sources of information were measured using a similar Likert-type scale (1 = poor...4 = excellent). A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .63 was produced for the organizational influencers scale, and .76 for the sources of information value scale in this study.

Content and face validity were established by a panel of experts from Texas agricultural commodity board members who did not participate in this study. The instrument was field-tested prior to data collection and approval to perform the study was granted by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (#2002-548). Minor editing (wording) changes were made to the final version of the research instrument. Demographic data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Significant relationships were explored using bivariate analyses.

Results

Respondents were mostly male (98%), represented a cotton growers association (66%), and were 46 to 55 years old (46%). They had attended college or completed an undergraduate degree (80%), were raised on a farm or ranch (74%), and currently owned a family-operated farm or ranch (98%) (Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Frequencies of Respondents (N = 50)

Variables		<i>f</i>	Percent ^a
Gender:	Male	49	98
Commodity organization:	Cotton	33	66
	Corn	11	22
	Wheat	5	10
	Grain Sorghum	1	2
Age:	46-55	23	46
	>56	17	34
	36-45	5	10
	26-35	4	8
Education:	Undergraduate degree	26	52
	Attended college	14	28
	High School diploma	5	10
	Masters degree	2	4
	Doctoral degree	2	4
Location where raised:	Rural farm/ranch	37	74
	Rural Community	7	14
	Town (5,000-50,000)	2	4
	Small City (50,001-200,000)	2	4
Family-owned farm or ranch:	Yes	49	98

Note. ^aFrequencies may not equal 50 because of missing data.

To complete the first objective, respondents' were asked to rank order the most important producer programs in the 2002 Farm Bill. Six programs (Sulak, 2000) were included to determine respondents' perceptions of farm bill programs impacting their respective agricultural commodity organizations (Table 2). Respondents ranked farm commodity programs, disaster assistance, and international trade as the most important 2002 Farm Bill programs. Foreign food aid, promotion/check-off, and conservation programs were ranked least important.

Table 2

Respondents' Ranking of Important Producer Programs in the 2002 Farm Bill (N = 50)

Programs	Ranking Frequencies ^a						Overall Rank ^b
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	
Farm commodities	44	3	2	—	—	—	1
Disaster assistance/crop insurance	6	29	4	9	1	—	2
International trade	3	10	12	12	11	—	3
Conservation, environment and water quality	1	2	21	9	13	—	4
Promotion/check-off	8	2	9	9	13	—	5
Foreign food aid	1	1	4	3	10	2	6

Note. ^aFrequencies may not equal 50 because of missing data. ^bOverall rank was determined by weighting raw scores in reverse order; 1st place scores received six points each, while 6th place scores received one point each. Individual weighted scores for each program were summated to derive the overall rank.

Organizational support of the nine primary issues in the 2002 Farm Bill was measured using an inventory (opposed, neutral, or support). Respondents indicated their organization's initial position to each issue before it became a part of the farm bill (Table 3). Selected Texas agricultural commodity board members believed their organizations initially were most supportive of issues concerning target prices, marketing loans, and planting flexibility (88%, all). Least supported (10%), and most opposed (78%), was the issue of payment limitations (Table 3).

Table 3

Frequencies of Respondents' Perceptions of Organizational Support for Primary Issues in the 2002 Farm Bill (N = 50)

Issues	Opposed		Neutral		Support	
	<i>f</i>	Percent ^a	<i>f</i>	Percent ^a	<i>f</i>	Percent ^a
Target prices			4	8	44	88
Marketing loans	3	6	2	4	44	88
Planting flexibility	3	6	2	4	44	88
Crop insurance			7	14	40	80
Non-recourse loans	3	6	4	8	38	76
Environmental quality incentive program	3	6	8	16	33	66
Conservation compliance requirements	6	12	21	42	16	32
Wetland protection	4	8	31	62	10	20
Payment limitations	39	78	5	10	5	10

Note. ^aPercentages may not equal 100% for each issue because of missing data.

To complete the third objective, respondents were asked to record their agreement levels for 12 statements measuring their perceptions of organizational influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill (Table 4). Respondents strongly agreed that their respective organizations influenced the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill ($M = 3.52$). They agreed that farm organization coalitions were essential for enacting the 2002 Farm Bill ($M = 3.49$). They disagreed with the statement that their organizations' policy influence had decreased with the current farm bill, more than it had compared to previous farm bills ($M = 1.84$) (Table 4).

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Agricultural Commodity Board Members' Perceptions of Influencers

Affecting the Final Outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill (N = 50)

Statements	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Your organization strongly influenced the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill	3.52	.65
Farm organization coalitions were essential for enacting the 2002 Farm Bill	3.49	.77
Ag Committee Chairs influenced the 2002 Farm Bill more than in previous farm bills	3.19	.67
Farm organizations had more influence than agribusinesses on the 2002 Farm Bill	3.16	.62
Congressional leadership influenced the 2002 Farm Bill more than previous farm bills	2.96	.70
Environmental interest groups influenced the 2002 Farm Bill more than previous bills	2.94	.63
Environmentalists' interests were opposite of farmers for the 2002 Farm Bill	2.89	.91
Non-farm interest groups strongly influenced the 2002 Farm Bill	2.84	.80
Agriculture Subcommittees influenced the 2002 Farm Bill more than in previous bills	2.77	.60
The 2002 Farm Bill has more impact on farm production than previous farm bills	2.66	.73
Agribusinesses had more influence than farm organizations on the 2002 Farm Bill	2.23	.67
Your organization's policy influence in the 2002 farm bill decreased compared to previous farm bills	1.84	.66

Note. A Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree...4 = strongly agree) was used to measure board members' perceptions of influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill.

The value of commodity board members' sources of information for education about the 2002 Farm Bill was measured using a Likert-type scale (1 = poor...4 = excellent). Respondents rated seven sources of information used to learn about the farm bill (Table 5). Selected agricultural commodity board members rated Extension/University ($M = 3.13$) and Internet ($M = 2.83$) information sources as "good." Radio, television, and newspapers ($M = 2.17$) and congressional reports ($M = 2.33$) were rated as "fair" sources of information used to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill (Table 5). No information sources achieved an overall rating of "excellent."

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Agricultural Commodity Board Members' Perceptions of Information

Source Value in Learning about the 2002 Farm Bill (N = 50)

Statements	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Extension/University	3.13	.87
Internet	2.83	.99
Magazines, journals, farm publications	2.63	.76
Satellite technologies	2.51	.83
Consultants	2.50	.80
Congressional reports	2.33	.82
Radio, TV, newspapers	2.17	.93

Note. A Likert-type scale (1 = poor...4 = excellent) was used to measure board members' perceptions of the value of information sources used to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill.

To fulfill the fifth objective, respondents' perceptions of influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill, and value of information sources used to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill were summated and correlated with selected demographics (commodity organization type, age, location where raised, and education) to determine if significant relationships existed (Table 6). Because the lone sorghum board member returned incomplete data, those results were not included in the correlational analyses. Therefore, the categories of agricultural commodity organization type, age, location where raised, and education were coded as multichotomous nominal variables. Pedhazur's (1982) convention for dummy coding the variables was used. Davis' (1971) convention was used to describe the magnitude of relationships. Relationships between multichotomous nominal and interval variables were analyzed as Cramer's V correlations (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1994).

A significant, moderate relationship ($r = .41$) existed between the perceived levels of influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill and cotton board members (Table 6). The relationship indicates that cotton association board members perceived organizational

influencers affected the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill more ($M = 34.70$) than did board members from other agricultural commodity organizations ($M = 32.98$). Also, a significant, moderate negative relationship ($r = -.34$) existed between the perceived levels of the influencers and corn board members. This inverse relationship indicates that corn association board members perceived organizational influencers had less ($M = 29.18$) effect on the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill than did board members from other agricultural commodity organizations. The final significant, “very strong” negative relationship between cotton and corn board members merely indicates that the dummy-coding schema used was diametrically opposed (Table 6).

Table 6

Significant Correlation Coefficients among Selected Variables (N = 50)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Influencers affecting the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill	-	-.03	-.34*	.41**
2. Value of information sources to learn about the 2002 Farm Bill		-	.09	.09
3. Corn ^a			-	-.74**
4. Cotton ^a				-

Note. ^aMultichotomous nominal variables; reported as Cramer’s V correlation coefficients.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

A limited response ($N = 50$) to this survey does not lend itself well to making sweeping statements about all Texas agricultural commodity board members, but does give insights into the make-up, perceptions, and values of those who did respond. Not surprisingly, respondents were male, 46 years old or older, reared in a rural location, and operated their family-owned farms or ranches. The vast majority had attended college or held an undergraduate degree, which

bodes well, when coupled with age and experience, for the leadership being provided to the corn, cotton, and wheat commodity boards.

One of the primary recommendations resulting from this study emanates, not from the data collected, but from the lack of responses produced. Although agricultural commodity board members value privacy of membership information, a true and accurate accounting of their or their members' perceptions about U.S. agricultural policy cannot be ascertained without greater access to the population of interest. Without adequate access, state- and national-level policy makers can only speculate what agricultural commodity organization members think about the policies affecting producers nationwide. Increased cooperation between Texas agricultural commodity organizations and researchers is needed to gather accurate perceptions about the 2002 Farm Bill.

Respondents valued target prices, marketing loans, and planting flexibility issues most in the 2002 Farm Bill. True to their nature, board members perceived these programs had the most impact on their organizations, and probably held the greatest relevance to their livelihoods. This finding mirrors what was found in an earlier study of national commodity board leaders (Sulak, 2000). Another similarity between Sulak's study and this one was that respondents did not perceive the importance of environmental or international issues highly. Texas agricultural commodity board members were not that different than their national counterparts, but this finding reveals an educational need exists to help commodity board members better understand the interconnectedness of domestic and foreign agricultural markets and production and environmental stewardship.

Concerned that the 2002 Farm Bill would compromise their livelihoods, Texas agricultural commodity board members believed their respective organizations initially opposed

payment limitations. Womack (2002) stated that payment limitations would require agricultural commodity board leaders and members to seek help from the Secretary of Agriculture in establishing procedures to clarify and better identify the payments to individual producers. Womack believed that payment limitations could limit agricultural commodity organization members' ability to produce crops because it puts a cap on eligibility for participation in farm programs. Farm programs would have an overall reduction; limits would be put on direct and counter-cyclical payments.

A shift in perceptions of organizational influencers affecting the final outcome of a farm bill occurred between national (Sulak, 2000) and state-level commodity board members. In Sulak's study, commodity board leaders perceived that the agriculture committee chairs and congressional leadership had the most influence on the 1996 Farm Bill formation process. Sulak concluded that national agriculture commodity organizations had little or no influence on the final outcome of the 1996 Farm Bill. Respondents in this study perceived their respective organizations strongly influenced the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill. This shift in perception may be related to the multitude of House Agriculture Committee hearings that allowed commodity groups to present specific recommendations for the new farm bill (Mark, Daniel, & Parcell, 2002). Too, it could be the result of a homogenous respondent group's collective perception that their organization's input had great impact in forming the 2002 Farm Bill. Regardless, continued work in gathering input from agricultural commodity board and organization members will be beneficial to policy makers as new farm bills are crafted, debated, enacted, and implemented.

An important finding in this study was the value commodity board members placed on the Cooperative Extension Service and the land-grant University as an information source for the

new farm bill. Respondents valued these sources, and the Internet, more so than they did for radio, television, or newspapers. It was not clear if board members used the Internet to access Cooperative Extension Service information, but the implication exists that a combination of Extension/University and Internet sources can be a powerful conduit to increase understanding in future farm bills. Cooperative Extension Service faculty and staff can use this finding to ensure their farm bill, and other agricultural policy materials, are up-to-date and posted in an easily accessible manner on the Internet. Additionally, state departments of agriculture may use this result to enhance their own Web sites, while focusing less effort on producing education resources that are radio, television, or newspaper-based. Additional research is needed to determine if agricultural commodity board members are using the Internet to access agricultural policy information from Cooperative Extension Service and/or university-based Web sites. Also, research to determine if commodity board leaders or members can distinguish differences between information sources and channels may help clarify agricultural communications research.

Selected Texas agricultural commodity board members held dissimilar beliefs about an organization's influence on the final outcome of the 2002 Farm Bill. Cotton association board members felt their organization influenced the final farm bill outcome more than did the corn association board members. We were aware that these relationships may be due to actual statistical significance, or they may be the result of a small homogeneous subset of respondents. Additional research, with a larger, more diverse sample will help elucidate these findings. Also, research conducted over time will aid in understanding the relationships between agricultural commodity board members' perceptions of and influences on the final outcome of future farm bills.

A lesson can be learned from Mark, Daniel, and Parcell (2002) that agriculturists' perceptions do change over time and these changes impact agricultural policy at the national level. Farm policy is not enacted in spite of our nation's agriculturists it is enacted because of them. Additional efforts are needed in gathering, analyzing, and reporting agriculturists' perceptions of national agricultural policies. Mark, Daniel, and Parcell noted that the Cooperative Extension Service personnel play a major role in developing and delivering educational programs to educate the public about U.S. Farm Bills. Future efforts are needed in gathering data about stakeholders' perceptions of agricultural policy. Agriculturists' understanding of future farm bills will be dependent upon accurate data collected and used in developing valid and relevant Cooperative Extension Service educational programs.

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