

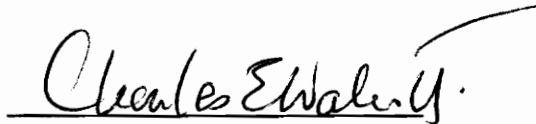
**Agents of fundamental policy change?
Political strategies of the environmental, sustainable
agriculture, and family farm groups in the 1990 farm bill**

by

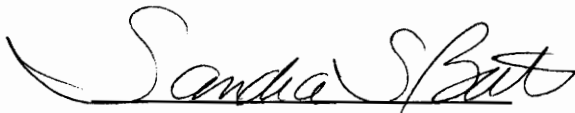
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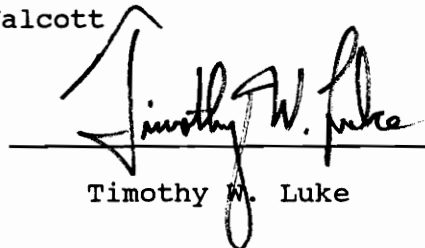
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Agents of fundamental policy change?

The political strategies of the environmental, sustainable agriculture, and family farm groups in the 1990 farm bill

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Political Science

(ABSTRACT)

This study investigates the strategies and policy impacts of the environmental, family farm, and sustainable agriculture groups in the 1990 farm bill legislation. In spite of "genuine" interest in a fundamental policy reform, and in spite of a common agenda, the three different types of interest groups mostly opted for parochial, incremental policy demands.

This self-restrictive interest group behavior and the groups' limited impacts on policy outcomes is explained by organizational limitations and self-interests of the challenging interest groups as well as by institutional protection of the American political system. This protection specifically applies to the agricultural domain with its distinctive farm bill construction. New and potentially challenging farm bill interest groups have not been agents for fundamental policy change, as the policy status quo (old policies as well as governmental inaction) is structurally protected.

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During the two years, my family gave me the indispensable feeling of belonging. Above all, I want to recognize my spiritual teacher: Sri Swami Satchidananda. May his directions further me on the Yogic path towards an easeful body, a peaceful mind, and a useful life.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The puzzling stability of U.S. farm policies

The current farm programs have survived their drafters. Drafted in the 1920s and installed as part of Roosevelt's economic policy and relief measures in 1933, the farm programs served to transfer income to the then crisis ridden, rural America. Five decades have added many new dimensions to agricultural policymaking, stretching from rural infrastructure, to food aid and environmental protection; and bureaucratic involvement expanded beyond the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) into the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the White House Office of the U.S. Trade Representative and others. Throughout, the programs stayed in place. Critical questions have been asked whether the farm programs still serve their purpose: stabilizing food supplies as well as producer incomes. Agriculture resisted reform demands, though, whether they came from urban critics or from USDA Secretaries.

The stability of the agricultural programs is puzzling especially in light of its impacts on farm structure and farming methods. Many observers feel that the farm programs induced intensive, monocultural production systems on large scale operations, with detrimental effects for family farms and the environment. The number of full-time, and family-sized farms

declined dramatically, and with it came the depopulation of rural America. Not rural America, but corporate America seemed to benefit. With these perceptions, agricultural producers were thought to not take care of the land, and pass it from generation to generation, rather they treated farmland as an industrial asset to maximize capital returns; with attendant agricultural pollution of food and the environment. As the extraordinary program monies are supposed to go for the "family farmer" and "virtuous yeomanry", and to provide enduring high quality food supplies, one may wonder why family farm, taxpayer, consumer and environmental advocates have not changed either conventional production methods or the programs driving them.

Assumptions and research questions

Policy outcomes reflect interests. Often, they reflect special interests. In the United States, interest group representation and interest group politics make up for much of the lack the integrative (or authoritative) functions of strong parties and centralized governments. Agriculture has always been an example of the self-serving nature of organized interests. The question that appears is whether the wide array of organized interests from the public sector and those representing marginalized populations and concerns, have the potential to substantially impact policies, creating new policies or reforming existing policies.

My study assumes that the potential of new and potentially challenging interest groups is restricted by their organizational limitations and the ambiguous nature of the American government: openness for many voices to be heard, but decentralized decision making and veto opportunities for negatively affected interests. Specifically, in my study on the political strategies of the environmental, sustainable agriculture, and family farm groups in the 1990 farm bill, the guiding research question is:

Within the context of the farm bill, are 'new and potentially challenging' interest groups agents for fundamental policy change?

A subset of detailed research questions is geared at the mechanisms that facilitate, or, possibly more often, restrict "radical" reform initiatives: (1) In what ways do organizational limitations and maintenance requirements, interest group landscape, and political opportunities guide the political strategies of the environmental, family farm and sustainable agriculture groups and their selection of policy demands in the 1990 farm bill legislation? (2) What are the potentials and bottlenecks of coalition building for the development of a common reform agenda? And (3) What institutional resources can the traditional agricultural interests mobilize in order to limit reform ambitions?

Objectives

As the objectives of rewarding land stewardship, low-input food production, and contributing to the vitality of rural communities has a strong appeal to the public, it is worthwhile looking at the mechanisms that have kept policy reform demands from fundamentally influencing agricultural programs. Displaying those mechanisms, and the strategic constraints faced by the policy challengers will help to understand, predict, and possibly influence future group strategies, policy demands, and the potential for fundamental policy change in U.S. agriculture.

On a theoretical level, my study adds to a pluralist critique about the quality of interest group-driven policy outcomes. Social interests are not represented in some equal measure of comparative strength, nor do the "rules of the (political) game" provide equal interest group opportunities. The sum of competing interests rarely yields the public interest.

1.2. Case study setting and sources of information

Farm bills provide the crucial opportunities for fundamental policy change in agricultural policies. In fact, farm bills are agriculture's foremost legislative vehicle, containing all of the crop specific commodity programs, as well as agricultural research and extension, conservation, crop insurance and rural development programs. In short, the farm bill sets the tone, or

incentive structure, for much of agriculture's production structures and farming methods. Farm bills contain also domestic food and nutrition programs,¹ food aid and export enhancement programs. Through their multipurpose character, and their four year coverage, the farm bills are major legislative enterprises, with many participants and high stakes.

As my study aims to understand the rationale of interest group strategies, and specifically the mechanisms and considerations leading to the selection of certain policy demands at the costs of others, I will spend some time in developing an organizational and policy framework that displays the "underlying" agenda of the family farm, environmental and sustainable agriculture interests, and the organizational representation of those interests in the form of interest groups.

Two main sources are prevalent: publications and documentary material, and interviews with interest group representatives from family farm groups (National Family Farm Coalition, National Farmers Union), from sustainable agriculture groups (Sustainable Agriculture Coalition; Center for Rural Affairs, Wisconsin Rural Development Center), from environmental and conservation groups (American Farmland Trust, Center for Resource Economics, National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club; Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumer Federation of America, Public Voice) and with congressional staff members (four

¹ The most important nutrition program is the food stamp program, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture.

staff members from the Senate Agriculture Committee and the House Agricultural Committee, three personal staff members, and one member of the Congressional Research Service). All interviews were semi-structured and open ended. Most took about one hour. Various people were able to offer follow-up interviews which usually took another hour at the time the major legislative battles were over. The documentary analysis was started in spring 1990; the main research was done in Washington, DC after late May. Most interviews were conducted between September and November 1990.

2. Why agricultural policy is so difficult to reform

This study investigates the capability of new, or potentially challenging interest groups to achieve change. Chapter 2 reviews the interest group literature on strategies and policy impacts (2.1.), and focuses then specifically at the agricultural domain (2.2.). It will be shown that the capabilities of interest groups to influence policy outcomes have diminished over time, as "new policy claimants"¹ face more tedious organizational needs and political environments, implying enduring structural biases in the political process against policy reform. New and potentially challenging groups apply two main strategies: broad coalition building aimed at major policy changes, or conversely, conflict-avoidance strategies aimed at establishing organizational policy "niches". So far, agricultural policymaking, specifically the farm bill legislation, has discouraged coalition-driven, fundamental reform strategies.

2.1. Interest group strategies and policy impacts

The social desirability of interest group politics, and a determining role of groups in the formation of public policies is

¹ The term "new policy claimants" will be used in the sense of "new" or "potentially challenging" interest groups further on. Both concepts refer mainly to voluntary, i.e. membership based interest groups, although much of what will be discussed applies also for non-membergroups.

asserted by the pluralist tradition.² It assumes that all social interests that need governmental support to realize their common concerns organize and mobilize political resources according to the intensity of their concern. As the U.S. governmental institutions grant multiple "points of access"³ and provide a neutral "referee" function for group competition over political claims, "...public policy is the equilibrium reached in this (interest group) struggle an any given moment."⁴

2.1.1. Group power in classical policy subsystem

Most traditional, pre-1970 group scholars agreed on the ability of interest groups to secure policy benefits. A critical fraction held, however, that consequent policy outcomes were socially undesirable as interest group power rested on representational and institutional biases in favor of special, mostly business interests. Olson's classic work focused on the representational dimension, showing that groups with small group sizes and concentrated benefits will induce potential members to contribute to group goals;⁵ larger, or "latent" groups with

² Truman 1951; Latham 1952; Dahl 1961.

³ Truman 1951.

⁴ Latham, quoted in Bosso 1987:5.

⁵ Olson 1965.

distributed benefits fall victim to free rider behavior. The consequent "exploitation of the big by the small" is furthered as special interest groups may be able to veil real policy impacts as unorganized publics are susceptible to the manipulation of symbolic reassurances.⁶

Adding the institutional dimension, Schattschneider characterized the structuring of the political process as "mobilization of bias", as these mechanisms limited the "scope of participants" to organized, special interest groups leading to a "definite upper-class and pro-business" bias.⁷ In many instances, bureaucratic activities such as dam and harbor projects by the Army Corps of Engineers fostered the formation and power of those groups.⁸ Once in place, established interest groups in coalition with congressional committees and administrative agencies developed self enforcing mechanism of "iron triangle" or subgovernmental decision making.⁹

The institutional critique of the 1950s and 1960s came to a devastating evaluation of interest group politics. Interest groups do have expedient power, as they enjoy representational exclusiveness and institutional privileges. Interest group "liberalism", as Lowi called the culturally based apology for

⁶ Edelman 1964.

⁷ Schattschneider 1975, 1st ed. 1960.

⁸ McConnell 1966; Lowi 1979.

⁹ On the concept of subgovernments see also Cater 1964 and McConnell 1966.

unfettered interest group activities, tends toward distributive policy making patterns of rather secret, sequential accommodation ("logrolling"), and lead to the conservation of social structures, to the selling out of public interests and to the delegitimation of democratic institutions.¹⁰

2.1.2. The new institutional bias: policy networks

Notions such as the "New Political System" in the latter 1970s¹¹ indicated major changes in the political arena, though, as will be shown, basic representational and institutional biases enduringly "skewed" interest group-driven policy outcomes. Some of the main changes were in fact within the interest group arena: an explosion in numbers and a shifting composition, with public interest groups and non-membership organizations such as institutions, think tanks and lobbying firms.¹² These changes were paralleled by congressional reforms such as the weakening of seniority, the empowering of subcommittees, and the growth of congressional staffs, all of which allow individual members to participate actively on a broader range of issues. In the executive branch, a stronger centralization of policy initiatives

¹⁰ Lowi 1979.

¹¹ King 1978.

¹² For figures on the growth and composition of the new interest group universe, see Salisbury 1990: 204-205.

is observed within the Executive Office of the President and particularly the White House staff. More complex issues, tighter budgets and more ideological debates in the 1980s added extra-institutional dimensions.

All factors combined, the emerging policy process has been described as more conflict-laden, more fluid and complex, and possibly even more decentralized,¹³ thus altering the premises to influence policy outcomes.¹⁴ Schlozman/Tierney conclude their study on interest group strategies with a "more of the same",¹⁵ though other interest group students conclude that a more of the same has actually lead to a new quality. Salisbury argues that representational and institutional changes, as well as high issue complexities and expanded governmental activities force interest groups to be engaged in "a never-ending process of learning, assessment, and calculation; and timely information, much of it available only from government, is the sine qua non of this process." Heclo (1978) characterized the emerging policymaking patterns as issue networks or shared knowledge groups of a

¹³ For instance, Chubb/Peterson 1985; Harris/Milkis 1989; King 1990.

¹⁴ Salisbury et al. 1987 in a study on interest group participation and conflict in four policy domains: agriculture, energy, health and labor; see also Schlozman/Tierney 1987.

¹⁵ Schlozman/Tierney 1986, referring to strategies such as testifying, financing election campaigns, presenting arguments and scientific findings to legislators etc.

somewhat unlimited number of expert participants,¹⁶ leaving interest groups essentially in the function of technical policy consultants.¹⁷ Policy outcomes may be rather unpredictable, though the power to obtain special benefits may have decreased.

Decreased interest group power to install new policies may leave interest groups in fundamentally different positions, though. Much of the strategically different positions have to do with the quality of the new policy claims and their associated political life chances.¹⁸ Distributive (pork-barrelling) policies may be as favored as ever among legislators. In contrast, many Congresspersons will shy away from making controversial decisions on redistributive and regulatory claims, but rely on and seem successful with¹⁹ bureaucratic casework, name recognition and symbolic manipulation.²⁰ Thus, in the context of controversial policy claims, the veto nature of the U.S. political system produces stalemate, legislative impasse and delegation. Interest groups defending the status quo (traditional

¹⁶ Heclo 1978. The emerging policymaking pattern have also been labelled as policy communities, and with a somewhat more policy specific connotation, policy domains; for instance, Salisbury/Heinz/Laumann/Nelson 1987; Salisbury 1991.

¹⁷ Contradicting both Schattschneider and pluralist writers, already Bauer/Pool/Dexter (1963) in a classic, though often ignored, case study on tariff legislation had characterized interest groups as service bureaus of sympathetic legislators.

¹⁸ Hayes 1981, Lowi 1964.

¹⁹ Symptomatically, Political Action Committee (PAC) monies are monopolized by incumbents.

²⁰ Mayhew 1974; Fiorina 1975.

"pork" projects as well as governmental inaction) may continue to prevail over "challenging", new policy claimants.²¹ With incumbents increasingly secure, the new generation of interest groups may need legislators and governmental officials as much as they are needed by them.²²

2.1.3. Coalition building, or "niche" cultivation

The competitive political environment leaves new policy claimants essentially with the choice of either going alone, or going with other potential policy challengers. The first strategy points at the establishment of group specific policy "niches", the second at coalition building. The second strategy seems to be self suggesting. Dense interaction and information exchange in issue networks make alliances rather unavoidable, as well as the strategic advantage of pooling political resources in an indecisive political environment. Policy domain and interest group centered studies find in fact stable patterns of interest group interaction, with clearly identifiable political friends

²¹ Even President Reagan shared that fate, being relatively successful on the de-regulative and re-redistributive agenda, but being rather impotent on distributive spending; for instance, Wildavsky 1990.

²² Salisbury 1990: 214.

and enemies.²³

Those findings could be rather self-fulfilling, however, when the level of analysis is kept at the domain or subdomain level, where collaboration may amount to little more than common position taking on rather abstract and aggregate questions. On the level of individual policy or program issues, in contrast, Browne discovered individual interest groups predominant and uncombated in "their" established, issue or policy "niches".²⁴ The organizational characteristics of new policy claimants show that conflict avoidance and policy "niche" seeking may be a rational, and rather common response of many new policy claimants. Many new policy claimants are public interest groups²⁵ initiated by political entrepreneurs who offer solidary and expressive member benefits rather than (selective) material benefits.²⁶ Those member commitments are difficult to sustain, as public values and preferences are often vague and fluctuant. Combined with entrepreneurial competition for similar causes,

²³ Salisbury et al. (1987) in the agricultural, energy, health and labor domain; Schlozman/Tierney (1987) on interest group strategies.

²⁴ Browne 1990, 1991. Though Browne's findings are derived from the agricultural domain, they are agreed to have broad applications; Salisbury 1990, 1991, Cigler/Loomis 1991.

²⁵ Besides public interest groups, the category of "new policy claimants" as defined here includes newly founded, as well as dissatisfied, old (thus "potentially challenging") groups with private focus, thus including all of the core actors, the environmental, sustainable agriculture, and also the family farm groups.

²⁶ Salisbury 1969.

public interest groups may spent considerable time adjusting their stated policy preferences.²⁷ Political entrepreneurs and staff may have difficulties mobilizing their membership on particular issues. Expressive groups may well be organizationally successful by securing external funds,²⁸ seeking media recognition and establishing permanent policymaking roles. "Niche" specific organizational identities and distinguishable services provide opportunities for individualized position taking and credit claiming in public and among policy makers and patrons.²⁹ Resource limitations of new policy claimants, issue competition and high entry costs in the policymaking arena³⁰ make it organizationally rational to focus on a limited number of policy issues. The self-restricting behavior is furthered by the pretentious political environment, inferring high transaction costs³¹ of data gathering, informing, negotiating and enforcing political compromises and deals. Working coalitions beyond the symbolic level are rather cumbersome with no mechanisms of

²⁷ Berry 1977.

²⁸ Walker 1983; see also Berry 1977.

²⁹ Browne 1990; 1991.

³⁰ The entry costs to getting involved into a policy issue have also been called production costs; Browne 1990.

³¹ Transaction costs include the costs of gathering information, and negotiating and enforcing new agreements, all of which are framed by institutional arrangements. Transaction costs include also such social institutions as norms and beliefs; North 1987, Williamson 1985.

durable decision making compliance.³²

As legislators and other policymakers are increasingly comfortable with symbolic strategies, interest groups will be further induced to the selection of few, affordable, politically acceptable and winnable policy issues. Thus, conflict avoidance through restrictive issue choices and exclusive policy "niches" may be organizationally desirable to meet the double requirements of expanding the organizational resource basis and limiting the political entry and transaction costs. Combining the representational and institutional argument, new policy claimants are seldom "agents for fundamental policy change". Instances of broad coalition building such as in the recent pesticide (1985-1986),³³ clean air (1989-1990) and health insurance legislation (ongoing in 1991) demanded large scale value changes and high issue salience, even then not guaranteeing non-incremental policy changes.

2.2. New policy claimants in the agricultural domain

Policymaking in the agricultural domain has served as a popular field for interest group studies. The structural forces - a bias in representation and process (institution) - underlie the policymaking patterns, having brought forth what may be called a

³² Berry 1989: 170-172.

³³ Bosso 1989.

"subgovernmental issue network", that is, a subgovernmental core with "niche" participants at the fringes. As agriculture has attracted many new policy interests in the last decade, stretching from distributive to redistributive to regulatory interests, it provides an ideal study opportunities, particularly on new and potentially challenging interest groups and their capabilities to influence policy outcomes. This study focuses on strategic opportunities and constraints of the environmental, sustainable agriculture and family farm groups to achieve fundamental policy reforms that reflect explicit social and environmental goals.

2.2.1. Agriculture's "distributive era" (pre 1970)

Agricultural interest representation and policymaking served as example of the classical institutional critique and specifically Lowi's notion of the "administrative state": policymaking predominance surrounding narrow governmental programs and agencies, which in turn foster interest group strength, legislative clout, and the tendency to insulate policymaking.

The model example of this development is the evolution of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF).³⁴ The first farm bureaus were created by local chambers of commerce in 1911, but

³⁴ Campbell 1962; Puhle 1975.

the 1914 Smith Lever Act, establishing the Agricultural Extension Service with federal and state money, provided the bureaus with their organizational basis. As part of the Extension Service's mission, and combined with high membership subscriptions, the AFBF attracted wealthier, market-oriented farmers. Quite naturally, their political demands focused on production and marketing questions, and due to their conformist rhetoric and outstanding institutional support, the AFBF was by the early 1920s the most influential agricultural group in Washington.³⁵

Providing much of the rationale for farm programs to the current day, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933³⁶ gave the AFBF and other farm organizations a second organizational boost. Production control committees on county level were often staffed with farm bureau secretaries or advisors; or, vice versa, the production control committee members were encouraged to form and lead county farm bureaus. Not the AFBF alone, but also the

³⁵ The AFBF took a leading role in the congressional "farm bloc" in the early 1920s and later efforts to support agricultural incomes; Hansen 1987; McConnell 1952.

³⁶ The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 demanded for a "fair exchange value" of agricultural products with industrial products on the price basis of 1910 - 1914. The "parity" level was claimed to be distorted through (partially tariff caused) price increases for industrial goods and through overproduction induced decreases for agricultural commodities.

In essence, the Agricultural Adjustment Act sought to boost agricultural commodity prices by production reductions, grain storage, and temporary dumping of domestic surpluses on the world market. The newly set up Commodity Credit Corporation offered to take over the farmers' produce in exchange for a non-recourse "loan" at fixed prices levels. Farmers were eligible for commodity loans when they complied with acreage allotments determined by county production control committees on the basis of nationally agreed upon production volumes.

Farmers Union and the Grange used farm and rural programs to provide member benefits and solidify their local positions, again attracting predominantly larger farm operators.³⁷ Thus, Roosevelt's farm policies (most importantly the commodity programs) furthered a vigorous agricultural clientele that, after institutionalizing policymaking access to the agricultural committees and to the USDA, monopolized policy benefits for the richer segments of the rural population they usually represented.³⁸ Symbolism of helping "rural" and "small town America" helped to close the agricultural subgovernment to outside critics.

The evolution of commodity specific subgovernments

Existing policies and institutional opportunities provided much of the momentum for an even stronger policymaking insulation in favor of politically and economically privileged clienteles during the 1950s and 1960s. The commodity specific programs

³⁷ Wilson 1977. Rational/public choice theorists hold, that market oriented, mostly larger farms are more aware of, and often more reliant on the functions and services of professional organizations and thus dominate agricultural representation; for a literature discussion see Senior Nello 1984.

³⁸ Especially the AFBF resisted policy initiatives in favor of small land holders, tenants, share croppers, and agricultural workers. For instance, the 1935 Resettlement Administration failed at the legislative level, and the 1937 established Farm Security Administration was gradually broken off by the AFBF in cooperation with Southern legislators. The initiating agencies within the USDA, including the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, got politically neutralized by reorganization in 1946; Puhle 1975: 168-172, 194-201.

installed in the previous decades opened systematic footholds for commodity specific subgovernments and the predominance of commodity specific producer groups. Commodity groups won political strength at the expense of the general farm organizations, as market oriented, often larger producers specialized their operations and consequently identified their vocational interests around their main program crops such as corn and wheat.

Institutional opportunities increased membership and policymaking roles of the commodity groups. "Local self governments"³⁹ developed, as constituents and evolving commodity groups gradually dominated the local production committees which were implementing the commodity programs on the local level.⁴⁰ Similar self-governmental tendencies at the county level evolved around other programs on soil conservation, agricultural credit and research. At the national level, implementing agencies, congressional committees and subcommittees, and the producer organizations developed subgovernmental relationships around each specific program crop,⁴¹ creating a self-perpetuating mechanism to further the commodity programs. Expert circles dealt with technical issues of the respective crop. On the aggregate level,

³⁹ Lowi 1979: 71-77.

⁴⁰ The county Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) committees implemented much of the farm bills and assigned acreage allotments, controlled the compliance of production quotas, and approved storage facilities.

⁴¹ Lowi 1979; Talbot/Hadwiger 1968.

conflicts to package the programs as farm bills were overcome through inter-regional and inter-commodity accommodation.⁴² Other centerpieces of agricultural legislation, such as soil conservation and agricultural research, were often linked directly to specific commodities, or indirectly through geographic distribution schemes with clear commodity implications, and were as such part of the "inside" deal.

As Browne characterizes the pre-1970 era, "Agricultural policymaking was the domain of a clubish community of farm oriented insiders."⁴³ The focal point of "the club" were members of the House and Senate agricultural committees, often Southern members with safe electoral seats and long seniority. Furnished with institutional privileges and vigorous protagonists, the commodity programs as well as core programs on conservation, credit and research withstood all major reform efforts during the 1950s and 1960s even when launched by Agriculture Secretaries.⁴⁴

2.2.2. Agricultural accommodation in a "subgovernmental issue network"

Agricultural policymaking patterns appear to have changed

⁴² Peters calls the policymaking pattern "intra-commodity trading"; Peters 1978.

⁴³ Browne 1987/88: 136-137.

⁴⁴ Cochrane/Ryan 1976.

substantially after the 1970s, but a closer look reveals that the described structural forces - a bias in interest representation and process - underlie the policymaking patterns to the current day, having brought forth what may be called a "subgovernmental issue network", i.e. a subgovernmental core with "niche" participants at the fringes.

At first glance, during the last 20 years agricultural policymaking has been transformed profoundly,⁴⁵ for the same reason as the general policymaking patterns changed. New dimensions such as trade, food aid, and food safety have been added, and issues got increasingly complex and conflictual. Bureaucratic involvement expanded beyond USDA into the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the White House Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) and others. Congressional reforms, including overlapping issue competencies between agricultural and non-agricultural committees and subcommittees enabled more legislators to get actively involved in agricultural issues. In addition, a host of new interest group advocates claimed stakes in agricultural policymaking and found legislators both inside, and often outside the agricultural committees and subcommittees willing to forward their case. Browne counted more than 200 organizations lobbying in the agricultural domain: commodity groups, agribusiness representations, general farm organizations, grassroots agricultural reformists (here subsumed under the family farm

⁴⁵ Browne 1987/88.

concept) and citizen groups such as rural development organizations, animal rights advocates, consumer protection and food assistance/aid proponents, and environmental and conservation groups.⁴⁶

Apparently, the traditional insider club has lost its exclusive control over agricultural policymaking. However, the explosion of new interests has not facilitated a substantial change of the much criticized farm programs,⁴⁷ nor has it facilitated a concentered reform debate.⁴⁸ The reason for agriculture's reform unwillingness lies in what has been identified as an ongoing structural bias in the policymaking process, both in its representational and institutional dimensions. Bolstered by the policies in place, the dominant farm organizations, the commodity groups, in coalition with their legislative allies, have successfully defined the farm programs as vital for "family farms", and the "Heartland of America". Within the farming community, the family farm oriented groups, including the recent protest movements, had neither the organizational potential and power, nor the political willingness to redirect agricultural symbolism.

⁴⁶ Referring to Hadwiger 1982, Browne uses the term "externalities/alternatives" lobby to specify the thrust of the citizen groups involved in agricultural policymaking.

⁴⁷ The core, farm programs are the farm commodity, or just commodity programs, with other programs such as export enhancement, research, conservation and credit often in a subsidiary function; for a substantial critique and potential reform directions of the commodity programs see next subsection.

⁴⁸ Browne 1987/88.

The representational and institutional bias extended into the realm of the new participants outside agriculture. Organizational limitations and prerequisites made them seek group specific identities and recognition with patrons, policymakers, and the attentive public. Most new policy claimants were successful in carving out particular issue "niches" by formulating "marketable" demands in the political process. Notwithstanding radical rhetoric, most new program elements such as farmworker safety, wetlands protection, but even pesticide registration and residue regulation in foods had much of an adjunct character with little impacts on actual production and marketing.

Much of agricultural policymaking is characterized by mutual accommodation, rather than by ongoing conflict. The agricultural committees have been largely controlling the stakes. Major opposition to the farm programs has been stopped by the creation of new, and compatible programs, such as food stamps program, Food for Peace, favorite trade provisions, or, most recently, the Conservation Reserve Program. Accommodation inside the (expanding) agricultural realm has been complemented by log-rolling arrangements with urban and labor interests, such as rural votes for minimum wages (in 1973)⁴⁹ and textile quotas during the 1980s. The committee control of those political deals was facilitated by the mode and quadrennial rhythm of agricultural policymaking, as the farm bills encompassed all

⁴⁹Peters 1978: 25.

inside deals and allowed for concerted negotiations with congressional voters.

Thus, recent agricultural policymaking patterns may be characterized as "subgovernmental issue networks". Subgovernmental rule, and inter-regional and inter-commodity accommodation continue as underlying forces. Institutionally secured, and privileged with high benefits for a vigorous clientele, the traditional agricultural interests opened only at the margins for the new range of policymaking participants that invaded the agricultural domain in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result of the institutional privileges of the traditional farm bill forces, and the representational shortcomings facing most new policy claimants, most of newcomers found themselves in the framework of the farm bills, all of them adding legitimacy and stability to the overall package, including, in many perceptions, the disliked program core. Bonnen/Browne explain the puzzling perseverance of the traditional farm bill forces by applying the transaction cost approach⁵⁰ to the institutional arrangements and the still appealing agrarian myth of the yeomen landholders and family farming:

Vested interests roll along as industrially dominant linchpins providing protection for the broad array of loosely related programs that constitute present agricultural policy. These interests preserve the status quo largely by making politicians very aware of the large

⁵⁰ North 1987, Williamson 1985.

transaction costs of making fundamental change, while pulling around themselves the protective mantle of the agrarian myth. The myth not only helps keep them in power by generating public support for costly programs, it enhances power because agrarianism links farm groups together in jointly protecting their otherwise unrelated, narrow policy benefits. This political accommodation, moreover, ties the fate of the policy goals of nonfarm interests to that of commodity legislation, because these interests now share a stake in passing farm bills and, where necessary, preserving the utility of agrarian imagery.⁵¹

⁵¹ Bonnen/Browne 1989: 23.

3. Family farms and the environment: a "natural" coalition?

Notwithstanding the stability of the agricultural "issue network with iron core" in the 1970s and 1980s, the pressure for program reforms has increased: the Administration has promoted free markets, Congress has become more urban and consumer oriented, and budget pressure has limited pork-barreling. The accumulated critique and political frustration might have eventually turned into a qualitatively different policymaking context, providing an ideal study opportunity on the ability of new and potentially challenging interest groups to effect fundamental policy change.

The selection for this study of the environmental, sustainable agriculture, and family farm groups followed a twofold rationale. First, the underlying agenda¹ of each of the selected potential policy challengers has deep regulatory and/or redistributive aspirations that go well beyond marginal program adjustment and distributive "political turf" creation; each is indeed a "potential policy challenger for fundamental policy change". Second, the chosen groups have both strategic and substantial reasons to coalesce for this fundamental reform. The "strategic" argument points to the possible advantages of pooling political resources against a common political adversary; the

¹ The concept of an "underlying" agenda as defined in the context of this study reflects interests neither shaped nor limited through organizational and strategic considerations of representational institutions.

"substantial" argument adds the assumption of an overlapping agenda.

3.1. "Sustainable agriculture" as reform concept?

Agricultural tradition holds that farmers are natural land stewards. Indeed, historically farming was considered a way of life that furthered the sense of social responsibility. In light of modern agriculture's impact on the environment, however, that position appears mistaken. Agriculture functions as any other business sector that tends to socialize its externalities. In fact, so-called "family farm" interests as they were reflected in most policy demands have usually been geared at maximizing short-term economic benefits.

The conflicting views of agriculture - "family farming" in its original sense, versus modern "agribusiness" - lead to different perspectives of how agricultural production practices can be reconciled with environmental needs. Were capital realization the dominant goal, then agriculture should apparently be treated as any other business sector driven by economic incentives and social and environmental regulation. In fact, many agronomists consider modern, large-scale farm firms as superior candidates for environmental regulation. Scale allows for the hiring of scientifically trained nutrient and pest experts who are able to implement bureaucratically framed and scientifically

tested management plans - a potentially effective marriage of market and profit orientation, applied science and technology, and bureaucratic control.

On the other hand, sustainable agriculture protagonists claim that the concept of family farming has been alienated in the political realm, thus obscuring the social value as well as the inherent limitations of sustained family farm structures. In the view of sustainable agriculturalists, "genuine" family farming has encompassed a lifestyle and mindset that emphasized long-term sustainability of locally and inter-generationally bound farmsteads. Family farmers, in that view, were risk averse and preferred diversified operations. Rather than capital realization, family farm agriculturists considered farmland as homeland and aimed at the preservation of the natural resource base. In short, with this perception, family farmers are assumed to be good land stewards - if economic and institutional circumstances will only allow it. However, as these circumstances have historically worked in favor of intensive and specialized farming methods, family farmers have been left with the option of either leaving the land or "going with the technology trends." The consequences: farm consolidation, environmental degradation, and lowered food quality.²

As the family farm concept has become alienated in the political realm, the new concept of sustainable agriculture was

² For an explicit discussion of the policy induced changes in farm structure and methods see section 3.2.

born to connect the social with the natural dimension. Sustainable agriculture has been characterized as diversified and holistic, "in tune" with ecological concepts, healthful, environmental and community enhancing, and responsive to broader social goals.³ With such farming methods as crop rotation for pest control and soil improvement, and manure and crop residue management to substitute for pesticides and inorganic fertilizer, and labor and land to substitute for machinery, sustainable agriculture is seen as an alternative to conventional agriculture. It is perceived as having obvious benefits for the environment, but also having increased economic opportunities and other social benefits for family farmers and rural communities. On the basis of a recent case study series, the National Research Council asserts that:

a small number of farmers in most sectors of U.S. agriculture currently use alternative farming systems, although components of alternative systems are used more widely. Farmers successfully adopting these systems generally derive significant sustained economic and environmental benefits. Wider adoption of proven alternative systems would result in even greater economic benefits to farmers and environmental gains

³ Batie/Taylor 1989: 7, referring to Lockeretz 1986; for a definition of sustainable agriculture see also Parr/Papendick/Youngberg/Meyer 1990: 52.

for the nation."⁴

Studies on the effects of widespread adoption of sustainable agriculture suggest positive social and economic impacts on rural communities.⁵ Increased labor and management needs promise increased employment opportunities and increases in wages. A growing informal economy may result around direct marketing efforts.⁶ Local investment might also go up as less capital would be spent on outside supplies and debt-services. More could be spent on local retail trade, potentially leading to more service-oriented, diversified investments,⁷ a "healthier main street".

Thus, on a philosophical level, sustainable agriculture does provide a concept for fundamental policy change, though it may have to compete with the bureaucratic/technical ideal of the modern, closely regulated, high-tech farm firm.

⁴ National Research Council 1989: 5-6. Other empirical and econometric studies do not find an unanimous answer on the profitability of sustainable agriculture on the individual farm level, but as various factors in favor of sustainable systems have been overlooked, some argue that the economic opportunities appear promising; Batie/Taylor 1989: 8-9.

⁵ Flora 1990.

⁶ Lockeretz 1986: 292-293; Batie/Taylor 1989:12.

⁷ Flora 1990: 354; Lockeretz 1989.

3.2. Family farm and environmental concerns: A common reform agenda?

Sustainable agriculture provides a philosophical concept that links "family" to environmental values and practices. However, whether that connection can be upheld on the technical level of concrete policy reform demands garners some discussion.

3.2.1. Farm program impacts

Commodity programs

Commodity programs probably have had a detrimental impact on family farms through a number of direct and indirect mechanisms. Some of these have been very obvious, others possibly unforeseen. Commodity programs encourage a growth strategy for individual producers, as the manner in which program benefits are calculated forces producers to maximize crop specific base acreage and yields. Therefore, the commodity programs have accelerated the application of intensive technologies and the concentration of farmland. As growth in average holdings necessarily goes with the loss of farms, the number of farms declined by half between 1950 and 1982.⁸ This decline occurred mainly in medium-size farms and, to some extent small-size farms, leading to what is commonly referred to as the bipolar structure of agriculture.

⁸ Batie/Shabman/Kramer 1989: 8.

Farm program benefits could be distributed much differently if the main goal were to support and sustain family farms. Recent figures account that 30,000 farms - about 1.3 percent of the nation's 2.2 million farms - with sales of over \$500,000 control over 30 percent of the production and account for over 55 percent of all net farm income.⁹ Thirteen percent of farms with more than \$100,000 in annual sales account for almost 70 percent of farm output, 30 percent of farmed hectares, and over 80 percent of farm income.

On the other end of the spectrum, numerous small farms operate on a part time basis. The recognition of the bipolar structure of U.S. agriculture has challenged the traditional view that public programs assist family farms. As a result, the historic rationale for agricultural programs is no longer relevant, and public support for them may be weakening."¹⁰

Commodity programs also have accelerated environmental problems. First, they tend to encourage chemical-intensive, monocultural cropping systems by focusing program benefits on a handful of crops.¹¹ The highest supported commodities - corn, wheat, soybeans, rice and cotton - also need the relatively

⁹ Knutson 1990: 272.

¹⁰ Batie/Shabman/Kramer 1989: 8.

¹¹ Young/Goldstein 1987.

highest application of pesticides and fertilizer.¹² Second, the method by which program benefits are calculated contributes to environmentally unsound farming decisions.¹³ Farmers are locked in the current system as future program entitlements are based on historical cropping patterns. In addition, because deficiency payments¹⁴ are based on historical production, farmers feel a need to maximize their crop specific base acreage and program yields beyond economic or ecological justification to secure future program payments.¹⁵

Agricultural research and other governmental and economic institutions

Agricultural research is mostly focused on production increases and judged by narrow efficiency criteria, leaving aside many environmental, social and aggregate economic effects. Hightower/DeMarco make a classic critique of the agricultural research subgovernment.

"America's land grant college complex has wedded itself to

¹² Parr/Papendick/Youngberg/Meyer 1990: 62; see also Reichelderfer 1990: 205.

¹³ Parr/Papendick/Youngberg/Meyer 1990: 62-63.

¹⁴ Deficiency payments are federal payments to farmers participating in commodity programs and amount to any positive difference between government set target prices and the actual market price.

¹⁵ Davidson 1989: 249-257; see also National Research Council 1989, and General Accounting Office 1990.

an agribusiness vision of automated, vertically integrated and corporized agriculture... Had the land grant community chosen to put its time, money, its expertise and its technology into the family farm rather than into corporate pockets, then rural America today would be a place where millions could live and work in dignity."¹⁶

Although not necessarily a "conspiracy",¹⁷ most agricultural research by its very logic drives agriculture towards bifurcated agriculture with specialized, intensive, large-scale production systems on one side, and small, marginalized producers on the other. Most techniques favor of large and intensive production systems. Although most farmers should be able to apply the techniques and increase their farm acreage when necessary, a combination of social and institutional factors effectively works against smaller farmers:¹⁸

...the voluntary nature of the research system results in non-service to those who lack the sophistication, the social status, and the political clout to obtain such service. Income tax rules, farm programs, credit, and farm input markets provide and incentive for rapid adoption by large-scale producers....small scale producers compete poorly..¹⁹

¹⁶ Hightower/DeMarco 1973.

¹⁷ See also Hadwiger/Browne 1987.

¹⁸ See also Knutson 1990: 301-303.

¹⁹ Hildreth 1982: 243.

One of the crucial factors for the adoption of these techniques is, in fact, the access to capital - which is more difficult for small farmers, who also pay somewhat higher rates for credit. Highly capitalized enterprises tend to be found only on large farms.²⁰ Busch/Lacy argue that often larger farm owners who are also early adopters could increase farm size and resource base that make possible future adoption. Consequently, "the research system contributed to the emergence of client groups (large farm owners) who were more likely to be served with each subsequent innovation of technology."²¹

Besides its structural impact, modern agricultural technology, together with external and policy-induced economic forces, has also resulted in many environmental and food safety hazards.²² Production systems with high yield seeds, and increased application of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, and machinery have replaced labor inputs and succeeded many traditional and natural low-input techniques of weed control and soil and nutrient rebuilding. These largely research and technology-driven changes have created a range of environmental problems, including chemical contamination and depletion of groundwater, surface water, and soil resources, including vulnerability to disease of monocultural species of plants and

²⁰ Busch/Lacy 1983: 181, referring to Kerr 1980.

²¹ Busch/Lacy 1983: 181.

²² For a review of the literature on the environmental impacts of agricultural technologies see National Research Council 1989: 97-134.

animals, and including destruction of wildlife habitats.²³

Many other governmental and economic institutions also speed up the process of farm concentration and the application of high-input, monocultural production systems. Financial institutions encourage farmers to maximize the production of commodity crops, as farmland values are appreciated on the basis of commodity bases and yield histories.²⁴ The American tax structure favors larger producers in various ways, including tax shelters that make agricultural investments profitable for outside investors. Some of the direct effects on agricultural structure are increasing land prices, farm consolidation, and absentee land ownership.²⁵ The tax reforms of 1986 might have reduced or reversed the discrimination of labor against capital investments, but trends toward the bipolar farm structure of farm firms on one side, and marginalized, often part time farms on the other, might still be accelerated.²⁶

3.2.2. A family farm/environmental agenda?

As agricultural policies drive large-scale, highly specialized and intensive production structures, it may be

²³ Hightower/DeMarco 1973.

²⁴ Davidson 1989: 253.

²⁵ Davenport/Boehle/Martin 1982.

²⁶ Knutson 1990: 301.

concluded that the underlying agenda of family farm, environmental and sustainable agriculture advocates aims at radical changes of the current farm programs. All of these groups might be deemed "potential policy challengers for fundamental policy reform." However, whether a genuine opposition to the core, commodity programs translates into collective demands and a pooling of resistance in the political arena is an open question.

Restructuring commodity programs to stabilize family farm incomes

Fundamental policy reform is necessary to gear farm programs to their stated goal of stable family farm incomes. Although the commodity programs have accelerated the farm consolidation and the loss of family farms, their abolition is not a short term policy option. Moderate sized farms would suffer most, since they depend on market incomes and are at a disadvantage in terms of risk management and economies of size when it comes to adapting to the new conditions (compared to large and corporate farms).²⁷

There is some argument that the negative effects of commodity programs are not so much the consequence of their design, but rather of their half-hearted application. Technology gains outstripped (insufficient) supply control losses. Opponents hold, however, that forced set-aside expansions place special burdens on smaller producers. More ambitious supply management efforts may also further the discrimination of technology

²⁷ Knutson 1990: 286.

advancements and other institutional factors against smaller and mid-sized producers.²⁸ Such efforts may also sharpen many of the environmental "flaws" in the commodity programs, as induced land scarcity and high agricultural prices change the relative input mix in favor of agri-chemicals.

Reacting to some of these shortcomings, recent commodity reform proposals have called for bushel-based, rather than acreage-based, supply management as a way to increase domestic price levels.²⁹ Marketing quotas on the basis of historic production promise higher producer returns, improve chances for family farm survival, and lessen intensive production practices as the quota can be produced on whatever acreage was available and suitable.³⁰ Critics claim, however, that bushel-based supply management is not a panacea for family farms or for the environment. First, the inequities of historic government payment systems would endure. Tradable quotas could even deepen the

²⁸ In light of these political and institutional shortcomings, former key protagonist for mandatory supply management Willard W. Cochrane wants government involvement limited to long-run managerial guidance and subsidized credit to moderate-size family farms; Knutson 1990: 288.

²⁹ Bushel based supply management proposals found much political attention in 1985 and 1987, when family farm groups pushed the proposal into the media with the help of Tom Harkin and Richard Gephardt; Knutson 1990: 262; see also section 3.3.

³⁰ Protagonists of this proposal emphasize also that budgetary costs can be kept low through international market cartels. The political efforts such a proposal failed in 1985 and 1987 due to the fierce resistance of free-market advocates and the commodity groups, both pointing at the mandatory parts of the bill and contending that losses in the U.S. world market share would occur; Knutson 1990: 263.

bipolar structure, as only large producers can afford expensive shares. Therefore, further targeting of benefits would be necessary in order to concentrate benefits on family farms, instead of on family farm industries and corporate producers. Bushel-based supply management, even in combination with targeting devices, does not necessarily improve environmental conditions on a larger scale, as only those producers with acreage reserves can extensify their production and still keep harvest volumes constant.

Much of the farm structural critique of the commodity programs amounts to a demand for targeting farm programs to family sized farms.³¹ Based on economic efficiency criteria, many economists favor the decoupling of farm payments from actual production.³² Income assistance would be based on social need. Family farm advocates are apparently not in favor of governmental "welfare checks," thinking they are demeaning and will only facilitate the move out of farming. It is rather difficult, however, to build conceptual and perceptual linkages between the social benefits of family-style farming and actual farm programs. To minimize political vulnerability of social "recoupling," many reform proposals stick therefore to the proclaimed technical farm program rationale - stabilization of production volumes and prices while securing farm incomes - while considerably modifying farm programs, so as to focus farm

³¹ For instance, Office of Technology Assessment 1986.

³² Phipps/Rossmiller/Meyers 1990.

programs on smaller and mid-sized farm operations.

One targeting method that combines the traditional, technical farm program rationale with family farm needs is the so-called "two-tier targeting system."³³ Two-tier targeting establishes higher prices for a certain level of production (the first tier), thus sustaining minimum incomes while keeping the conceptual linkage between production and program payment. The volume of production above the premium tier may be dictated by either world market prices or some kind of commodity price support and stabilization system. Two-tier targeting is a flexible approach as for the choice of eligible crops, and the prices and the volumes of the first tier. This flexibility allows for built-in conceptual linkages between social goals and actual payments: for example, providing payments for keeping small scale farming in disadvantaged production zones.³⁴ Liked by family farm advocates on substantial grounds, two-tier targeting may be contested strategically. Debate may be expected within the farming community, as the (re)distribution of program benefits would vary with the regional and size-specific farming structures.

³³ The two tier targeting systems should not be confused with a two tier price system which aims at minimizing trade distortions. Two tier price system establishes higher prices for a production volume equal to domestic consumption while leaving the second, usually lower, world market price to rule access production and international trade. The proposals can be combined, though, as both are volume based regulators.

³⁴ Similar proposals are discussed and partially implemented in the European Community, Switzerland and Finland.

The environmental critique of a two-tier targeting system will vary considerably with the actual design. Some designs may in fact further social and environmental concerns simultaneously, thus making a two-tier targeting system a vehicle for both social and environmental recoupling. Under such designs, production practices would become more environmentally sound for many of the smaller and mid-sized farms as the financial pressure to specialize and intensify waned. Depending on the price structure of the first tiers, farm diversification and favorable rotations could result, as farmers would be induced to produce the premium stocks for a variety of eligible crops in the program. Two- (or multi-) tier targeting systems could be sophisticated and applied regionally to reward those production structures most environmentally suitable or otherwise socially desirable. Notwithstanding its potential, a two-tier system has environmental limitations, as the lower tier only effects the farming behavior of smaller and moderate sized farms. Complementary measures would have to be taken to influence management and production practices for production volumes above the premium stocks.

In strategic terms, social recoupling proposals are politically delicate, as traditional farm program forces have monopolized the family farm notion for their own purposes. Proposals to gear farm payments to the goal of economically viable "family" farming thus would have to expose the current, structural limitations of family farm driven production

decisions, and would have to brandish the negative side effects of general price increases. Alternatively, building an argument for new programs on the concept of sustainable agriculture, and emphasizing the environmental benefits may be strategically easier.

An environmental reform agenda: commodity program reform versus regulation

To make agricultural practices structures environmentally benign, three main approaches may be chosen: (1) land easements (including total land retirement from agriculture) on the most environmentally threatened lands, and (2) environmental regulation or (3) manipulated program incentives to change management and production practices. An overlap of interest with family farm concerns may be found with all three approaches, as will be shown; although the third, program reform, may be the most promising.

The current Conservation Reserve Program is an example of the first approach (easement and land retirement), with farmers receiving rental payments to set aside erosive lands. Suitable areas, not covered by the 1985 legislation, are wellhead areas, groundwater zones, and wildlife habitats.³⁵ Traditional agriculturalists like these programs, as the programs work on an

³⁵ Deliberations during the 1990 farm bill process lead to the inclusion of those environmentally most sensitive areas into the retirement programs; see below.

incentive basis and serve supply control goals as well. Land retirements and easements, though, are costly and do not include all of the environmentally threatened land. Also, if the monies were available for large-scale retirements and generous easements options, environmental trade-offs would occur as the agricultural production on the remaining land was intensified. Just as important, land retirements and easements work at the "symptoms" level. Both reward historic resource depletion and pollution on retired lands and, if not combined with other programs, they permit environmental "misconduct" on the vast majority of agricultural lands. Nevertheless, carefully drafted easement options promise immediate environmental benefits while sustaining farming in a less intensive fashion.

Changes of production structures can be achieved through regulation. Pesticide registration has some tradition. The most important recently established programs (in the 1985 farm bill) are Sodbuster, prohibiting the initiation of production on erosive land; Conservation Compliance, forcing a reduction of soil losses on currently farmed erosive lands; and Swampbuster, prohibiting the drainage and farming of wetlands. All three recent programs met fierce resistance from the agricultural community and were substantially diluted during implementation.

Potentially, new legislation and stringent implementation could theoretically restrain all of agriculture's pollution and resource depletion - an ideal environmental solution at the planning level, but ignoring political feasibility, and

structural implications, and economic costs. Whether environmental regulation supports family farm incomes would depend on the actual policy measures. In the long run, stringent agricultural regulation (for instance, on pesticide and nitrogen use) might reduce overproduction or induce more labor intensive production structures. Long-run impacts will largely depend on other factors, such as relative prices and the availability of technology. Under certain conditions, potentially smaller, diversified low-input systems (sustainable agriculture) might become more competitive. In the short run, though, adoption costs might be incurred (for instance, technical education, soil testing laboratories) which could only be carried easily by large scale farm firms. Thus, environmental regulation might ultimately serve family farm interests if they were combined with temporary mitigation measures and long term adjustments in the commodity program, research, and extension area.

The third approach to reconcile current agricultural production systems with environmental prerequisites is in the area of farm program reform. The radical method, a "no program option", hardly serves environmental goals. Market prices reflect neither environmental externalities nor long term resource scarcity.

As the targeting discussion, and, specifically, the two-tier targeting system, has shown, reformed commodity programs could be tailored to simultaneously serve both family farm and environmental constituencies. Environmental reforms could change

the selection and relative prices of governmentally supported crops in favor of resource-conserving crops. Among those measures of "environmental recoupling" reforms are reducing corn support prices while increasing oat prices and cost sharing for cover and soil building crops. The method by which program payments are calculated could also be changed. For instance, the proven yield system that binds payments to historic production could be replaced with a land suitability scheme. Most important, base flexibility (most effective with changes in the commodity price structure) could allow farmers to respond to biological and environmental needs while securing income. Many such demands have in fact been developed by sustainable agriculture advocates, claiming that the current program structure has discriminated against resource-conserving crop rotations. If access to appropriate technologies and other institutional services (for instance, crop insurance, marketing opportunities) were secured, family farms might be more inclined to adopt to environmentally sound farm practices and more able to succeed.

A wide array of opportunities exist that could serve both family farm and environmental interests. The area of most substantial overlap is in the commodity arena, although much depends on the policy mix. Short-term conflicts, mostly in the regulatory realm, could be overcome if institutional services - such as credit and extension - were adjusted to the special needs of family farms. All of the identified interests - family farm, environmental and sustainable agriculture - have a genuine

interest in fundamental policy reform, with overlaps on both the philosophical and practical, policy level.

3.3. Organizational aptitudes for fundamental reform

Family farm and environmental overlaps in philosophy and policy are facilitating conditions for common reform strategies. Ultimately, however, representational and institutional factors decide on the groups' potential to be agents of fundamental policy reform.

3.3.1. Family farm groups

Family farm interests are represented by a range of interest groups, the most prevalent in federal policymaking being the traditional National Farmers Union (NFU), the Grange, and National Farmers Organization (NFO), and the "newcomers" in late 1970 and 1980, the American Agriculture Movement, Inc., (AAM) and the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC). Following the criteria of representativeness and political visibility, my study focused mainly on the NFFC and the NFU.

Founded in the populist surge, the NFU consolidated their organization during the New Deal by providing selective

membership benefits such as grain elevator storage.³⁶ Thus, like the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), the NFU recruits predominantly from the ranks of the richer farmers. Nevertheless, the NFU has kept much of its populist tradition and has been recognized by urban democrats as the farm organization representing liberal, family farm oriented positions on agriculture. Strong linkages to the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) are the base of many democratic, urban rural political trading. NFU decision making is centralized, although relatively autonomous state chapters have considerable input in the federal agenda. On most occasions, the upper Midwest chapters tend to dominate the member-weak South.

Over decades, the key political demand of the NFU was support of farm income primarily through the combination of high loan rate levels and supply control. When a proposal for a mandatory supply scheme failed in 1961, the NFU had to settle with decreasing loan rates and, in the early 1970s, with the introduction of the target price system. The NFU supported targeting devices in the form of modest (and easily evaded) income means tests, partly to placate urban critics.³⁷ In 1985, the NFU supported the bushel based supply management device of the Harkin bill.³⁸ However, fearing a political defeat and a

³⁶ Wilson 1981.

³⁷ Wilson 1977: 91.

³⁸ Browne 1988: 224.

consequent dismantling of the commodity programs, it was an open secret that the NFU preferred modifications in existing programs,³⁹ for which their representatives also lobbied. In essence, the lack of political opportunities and the organizational need to satisfy short term, constituent interests made the NFU support farm policies detrimental to family farms in the long run. The NFU did not undertake policy initiatives on questions of the environmental impacts of modern agriculture. Nonetheless, the NFU lent their name to the 1985 conservation provisions because of perceived compatibility with farm income goals.

The second family farm organization focused on in this study is the NFFC. Many of its organizational characteristics need to be understood in the context of its origin, the family farm crisis and the failure of the American Agriculture Movement (AAM).⁴⁰ Organized as farm protest group in 1977, the AAM gained tens of thousands of supporters, and with two "tractorcades" to Washington DC, they attracted considerable attention in the media and in Congress. Nevertheless, when the policy goal of income parity was not achieved immediately and radical factions disqualified their case, the AAM split 1983 over the question of a permanent lobby representation in Washington DC versus the continuation of its spontaneous, protest-oriented nature. After

³⁹ For instance, the NFU supported the farmers grain reserve program, some moderate targeting efforts, and several export enhancement initiatives.

⁴⁰ Cigler 1986.

strong membership decline, the AAM was no longer a serious challenge for the agricultural establishment.

As the AAM disintegrated in 1982-1983, grassroots crisis groups formed at the local level.⁴¹ Farm activists and rural organizers had learned that it is organizationally futile within the farming community to rely exclusively on expressive and solidary goods through radical rhetoric and political activism oriented at Congress. The farm crisis groups were formed to help financially distressed farms on a local, self-help basis, their means ranging from emotional support to legal and financial services. Churches and other social organizations provided institutional support. Eventually, many crisis groups drew also political attention on the state level, as their expertise and membership service made them the main representatives of family farms, or at least of the segment most affected by the debt crisis.

In 1985, the crisis groups put together the Farm Policy Reform Act, or so-called Harkin/Gephardt bill, which was the most radical reform package since the early 1960s. The Farm Policy Reform Act encompassed demands for high parity prices and bushel based, mandatory supply management; a moratorium on farm foreclosures; restructuring of the actual farm debts; and reform of the farm credit system. In spite of sympathetic media coverage of the crisis-shaken family farm movement, the Farm Policy Reform Act did not gain the necessary political momentum in Washington

⁴¹ Browne/Lundgren 1987.

for passage. Policymakers recognized the split within the family farm representation. The AAM, Inc., resenting the fact that the bill had been formulated without their involvement, failed to fully support the act as did the NFU, who considered parts of the proposal as politically too risky. In combination with political opposition from the agricultural establishment, the undecisive family farm representation allowed policymakers to ignore the key reform parts of mandatory supply management and of the restructuring of the debt and credit system. As at the high time of AAM activism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the crisis groups' impetus was once again channeled into a largely unchanged farm bill.

The voluntary structure of the crisis groups had contributed to their political failures, and it threatened to disintegrate their fragile coalition.⁴² Thus, four months after the defeat of the Farm Policy Reform Act, the crisis groups formally established the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC).⁴³ The NFFC rejected the agrarian fundamentalist propaganda on the supremacy of rural life. Instead, the NFFC favored neo-populist strategies towards broad social reform movements with labor unions and minority, church, and rural advocacy groups. Farm protest was applied more selectively, and although zealous in political rhetoric, the NFFC was willing to compromise. This

⁴² Browne 1988: 173-175, 223-225.

⁴³ The National Family Farm Coalition started initially as National-Save-the-Family-Farm-Coalition. For convenience, this study sticks to the later name.

strategy proved to be more effective in 1987, when much of the 1985 reform package was re-introduced as Harkin/Gephardt bill. Even though the commodity reform side was again ignored, the NFFC played a major role in the formulation and passage of federal reform and refunding of the Farm Credit System and the Farmers Home Administration.

Ironically, the NFFC had much in common with traditional, liberal farm groups such as the NFU. Both the NFFC and the NFU tried to build coalitions with other social groups, but their focus remained with the traditional agricultural establishment. Although the NFFC, like the earlier AAM, questioned the representation of family farm interests through the traditional farm organizations and blamed the dominance of the grain and international trade companies for the farm malaise, their political demands for agricultural parity increased the political momentum for the traditional programs. Most importantly, the traditional farm program interests were successful at painting social recoupling as "welfare programs". As interest representation, even within the family farm groups, is biased in favor of larger producers, the family farm groups did not seem to have the willingness nor the boldness to lobby explicitly for programs that would focus benefits on family-sized farms.

Among the core strategic decisions for the 1990 farm bill was the question of whether family farm groups would champion the broader sustainable agriculture agenda (i.e., social and environmental recoupling) or limit themselves to income

strategies such as targeting, mandatory supply management, or the traditional commodity programs at high price support levels.

3.3.2. Sustainable agriculture groups

The sustainable agriculture concept claimed a conceptual link between environmental and family farm concerns, and its organizational representation indicated that that link was also possible in the political sphere. On the national level, sustainable agriculture was represented by the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.⁴⁴ The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was a formal outgrowth of the Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, established in 1989 to influence the upcoming farm bill. The Sustainable Agriculture Working Group was "a network of farm, religious, conservation, environmental, food and rural advocacy groups", primarily from the Midwest, working towards "the long term sustainability of agriculture and rural communities, including family farms, wildlife, and soil and water resources."⁴⁵ One of the reasons the Sustainable Agriculture

⁴⁴ The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition members are: Alternative Energy Resources Organization (MT), Center for Rural Affairs (NE), Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Society, Kansas Rural Center, Land Stewardship Project (MN), Michael Fields Agriculture Institute (WI), Minnesota Food Association, The Minnesota Project, Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society (ND), Organic Growers and Buyers Association (MN), Wisconsin Rural Development Center.

⁴⁵ Sustainable Agriculture Working Group 1989: cover.

Coalition had to be formed separately was that some of the more prominent members of the Sustainable Agriculture Working Group members, Sierra Club, the Izaak Walton League, the Rodale Institute and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference had their own representatives and partially different positions in federal agricultural policymaking.

Some member groups of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition were rural advocacy groups with rather broad agendas. For example, the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Nebraska, with 7,000 donors and subscribers was a research, advocacy, and educational organization.⁴⁶ Policy areas included soil erosion, groundwater contamination, biotechnology, and rural community development. They promoted sustainable agriculture for its local economic and ecological role, but their research also linked it to international questions of agricultural trade and global warming. As a major contribution to the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the Center for Rural Affairs analyzed the program restrictions on adopting sustainable agricultural practices and developed reform proposals on commodity programs and research.

With a more specific focus on sustainable agriculture, the Land Stewardship Project, based in 3 different locations in Minnesota with 6,000 subscribers and 2,000 contributors, was "devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship toward farmland and to developing and promoting sustainable agriculture practices and

⁴⁶ Center for Rural Affairs 1991.

policies."⁴⁷ Practical activities included on-farm research and farmer-to-farmer information sharing efforts. In cooperation with the Kansas Rural Center and the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, the Land Stewardship Project conducted the "Middle Border On-Farm Research Consortium," funded by federal Low Input Sustainable Agriculture (LISA) funds to explore and disseminate low-input farming practices and integrate them into main stream extension and research.⁴⁸

The strong cultural and community orientation of the sustainable agriculture groups and their constituency indicated some characteristics of a new "social" movement, although most individual groups were of relatively recent origin and counted only some hundred, locally active members. As organizations, the sustainable agriculture and rural advocacy groups provided limited, mostly informative services to their members. Expressive motivations counted for much of the non-farm membership basis. The local community orientation and the populist rhetoric was potentially in conflict with their organizational stabilization through external funds⁴⁹ and the formation of a federal lobbying group. In fact, many of the less prominent member groups saw the creation of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition as a temporary

⁴⁷ Land Stewardship Project 1991.

⁴⁸ The Middle Border On-Farm Research Consortium 1990.

⁴⁹ For instance, some 85 percent of the Center for Rural Affairs funds, and some 95 percent of the Landstewardship Project funds were program specific; Center for Rural Affairs 1991; Landstewardship Project 1991.

vehicle designed to influence the 1990 farm bill, that would be dissolved thereafter.

The sustainable agriculture movement and the SAC were newcomers in federal agricultural policy making, and their newcomer status was aggravated by their organizational limitations. Limited funds and internal doubts on the usefulness of federal lobbying allowed the hiring of only one permanent spokesperson. Midwest activists sporadically furthered individual issues in the capital. An effective representation was sometimes complicated because of the consensual decision-making procedures, leaving little leeway for the strategic manipulation of policy demands in coalitions and in political negotiations. Apparently, SAC's main political asset was its unmatched technical expertise on sustainable agriculture practices.

Basic policy options for the sustainable agriculture groups

Because of the organizational limitations and the antagonistic nature of their proposals to the current farm programs, there was a temptation to avoid major confrontations with the agricultural establishment. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's "safe" strategy was to establish an issue "niche" on sustainable agriculture. Rather than broad, across-the-board reforms, the "niche" demands could focus on the limited number of farmers already employing sustainable agriculture practices as well as potential recruits. The current sustainable farmers

needed program "base" (to qualify for deficiency payments) that had been lost due to rotations with non-program crops, while the potential recruits needed base flexibility to shift into rotations without forfeiting future farm payments.⁵⁰ Such an add-on program would foster the sustainable agriculture organizations and encourage newly practicing farmers to join. Parallel reforms in the research and extension area (for instance, the expansion of the current LISA program⁵¹) could finance and attract sympathetic supportive researchers, extension agents, and the interested public.

Any efforts to change agricultural practices on a larger scale would have to be supported by forces both within and outside the farm community. Such a broad coalition was potentially in place already with the family farm and environmental groups. A coalition with family farm groups could capture considerable grassroots support, as indicated by recent survey studies on farmers' perception of environmental problems, and their willingness to employ alternative farming practices.⁵² However, as most moderate-sized family farms were in debt and

⁵⁰ Only program base calculated on the basis of historic cultivation of program crops qualifies for federal deficiency payments.

⁵¹ The Low Input Sustainable Agriculture (LISA) Program was authorized as part of the 1985 farm bill to explore and disseminate alternative agricultural practices. The LISA program provides research monies on a matching grant basis; eligible institutions include private research organizations.

⁵² American Farmland Trust 1990; General Accounting Office 1990.

could hardly bear additional financial risks, their representatives could only be expected to join a fundamental reform coalition with sustainable agriculture advocates if farm income was simultaneously secured.

With more political clout, the environmental and conservation groups would be a second, indispensable ally if the SAC were to head for fundamental policy reform.

3.3.3. Environmental groups

Among the most noted environmental and conservation groups in federal agricultural legislation were the National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. The first three belonged to the first generation of traditional conservation groups, which used to support the formation of public parks as key approach to the preservation of species and scenic landscapes. Beginning with the Sierra Club in the late 60s, all of them experienced a major transition towards a more holistic, environmental orientation and a stronger, eventually more institutionalized, representation in the capital. Greater professionalism and sophisticated lobbying and managerial skills transformed the environmental mainstream into "almost corporate entities,"⁵³ provoking some conflict within the organizations with respect to the kind of emotional

⁵³ Bosso 1991: 163.

and symbolic appeals used to increase membership commitments.

Decision making has become more board/staff dominated for the Audubon Society and the Wildlife Federation, whereas the Sierra Club has kept strong grassroots ties, decentralized issue selection procedures, and, consequently, rather broad issue orientation. In terms of political clout in Washington, D.C., the three traditional groups depended on their strong membership. Each has more than half a million members.⁵⁴ The Natural Resources Defense Council started as law firm in 1970, but eventually started also to build up a membership of about 130,000 members. Its political strength still is its legal expertise.

Only during the last 10 years have the four environmental heavyweights engaged themselves more immediately in agricultural policymaking and private land use practices. The Audubon Society has developed special staff expertise and a political issue "niche" on pesticide, groundwater and biotechnology issues, and the Wildlife Federation has concentrated on wetlands and habitat protection. The Sierra Club's agenda has included groundwater depletion, overgrazing of public lands, and pesticide residues in foods. With strong Club chapters also in the Midwest, and a committee on agriculture headed by farmers, farming issues were tackled from a farm environmentalist perspective, often with close ties to local sustainable agriculture groups.

The Natural Resources Defense Council traditionally was an

⁵⁴ Wildlife Federation: 853,833; Audubon Society: 575,000; Sierra Club 553,200; Bosso 1991: 163; Ingram/Mann 1990: 140.

expert in chemical poisons, working on food safety, groundwater and pesticide issues. In 1987, the Natural Resources Defense Council organized the "apple Alar" campaign, which sought to get the pesticide Alar off the market by an impressive, though emotionally-laden media campaign. Agriculturalists and representatives of the Environmental Protection Agency were upset by Natural Resources Defense Council's violation of the rules of the game, but many environmentalists and food safety advocates praised the Natural Resources Defense Council for its approach.

Other groups which were to play crucial roles in agriculture related natural resource issues were the Institute for Alternative Agriculture, the American Farmland Trust, and the Center for Resource Economics. Rather than broad membership bases, their political asset was expertise, and a highly knowledgeable and influential network reaching into research and educational institutes and the government. The Institute for Alternative Agriculture was a prominent promotor of alternative farm practices at the federal level since its foundation in 1983. The American Farmland Trust (founded in 1980) spearheaded the soil conservation efforts in the 1985 farm bill through its producer oriented, moderate conservation approach.⁵⁵ The Center for Resource Economics was founded in 1989 and built around Kenneth Cook. As a policy "entrepreneur", Cook worked for several conservation organizations and provided technical assistance in the 1985 farm bill, as well as a critical communication link

⁵⁵ Browne 1988: 231-232.

between the environmental groups and traditional farm bill interests.

Strategic options and organizational inclinations of the environmental/conservation groups

To classify the strategy of the environmental groups, two main options appeared: continuing with eclectic, "external" or "add-on" programs that hindered the worst agricultural practices and mitigated their most apparent impacts (these programs included most regulation and easements/retirements) versus going for "intrinsic", fundamental policy reforms in the commodity area. Pointing at the second option, a reform coalition with the sustainable agriculture groups seemed to be a rather natural reform coalition, that is, the environmental groups could foster grassroots attempts to spread environmentally sound farming practices. With the help of the sustainable agriculture groups and the family farm groups, the environmental groups could counter the agricultural ignorance indictment leveled by the traditional farm bill forces. In strategic terms, a broad coalition could unite more urban based voting blocks with rural, though mostly Midwest legislators.

Various representational and organizational factors worked against such a reform coalition, however. Many groups would not want to risk their established reputations and privileged access on specific agriculture related policy issues, whereas the family

farm and sustainable agriculture groups headed for a broader agenda especially on commodity program reform. With the high number of environmental groups in mutual competition for public recognition and policymaking access, the traditional farm bill interests began to try to "buy off" the groups most willing to compromise. Most importantly, the redistributive implications of most recoupling and commodity reform proposals would provoke fierce resistance from the agricultural establishment, with a high risk of a political impasse. As a result, the potential policy challengers have not been identified as organizationally prone agents for fundamental policy change.

3.4. Political climate, agenda setting and strategic formation

Although the potential policy challengers have not been identified as organizationally predisposed agents for fundamental policy change, major events or structural changes affecting agriculture like droughts, large scale value changes, or unpreceded price fluctuations may open structural opportunities, or erratic policy windows for fundamental policy reforms.

3.4.1. Family farm agenda: programmatic insecurity

Because of their organizational limitations, the family farm

groups could only be expected to attempt major policy reforms (such as mandatory supply management or social recoupling) if there was a real political prospect of success. Internal grassroots pressure especially from smaller producers, the availability of powerful coalition partners, and a favorable political climate in the capital could make a difference. But conditions were not ideal. International demand, and consequently national market prices had risen; the farm sector as a whole looked better. Many policymakers ascribed the signs of economic recovery to the trade-oriented changes in the 1985 farm bill and thus saw little need for commodity program reforms in the 1990 farm bill. As commodity program outlays were also in decline,⁵⁶ the commodity reform agenda of the NEFC had lost most of its impetus. Thus, even though state level rallies and star-studded Farm Aid concerts attracted hundreds of thousand sympathizers in the Midwest, nationally there was silence. Instead of organizing major demonstrations, media attention and public awareness were to be captured by dramatizing the ongoing individual hardships of enforced farm foreclosures and the consequent depopulation and desolation of rural communities.

Programmatically, the family farm groups seemed rather untouched by the unfavorable political climate. During agenda

⁵⁶ The outlays for the farm program and income support programs (i.e. commodity programs) that had amounted to record levels in the mid 1980s were declining during years as follows: outlays in 1983: \$18.8 billion; 1984: \$7.3 billion; 1985: \$17.7 billion; 1986: \$25.8 billion; 1987: \$22.4 billion; 1988: \$12.5 billion; 1989: \$10.5 billion; United States Department of Agriculture 1990b: No.5.

setting efforts, both NEFC and NFU promoted bushel based supply management, though no consistent reform agenda appeared. The NFU seemed to particularly suffer from internal conflicts. Whereas their "1989 Statement of Policy"⁵⁷ explicitly asked for marketing quotas and marketing certificates in supply management, the NFU's summer 1989 "Working Paper. 1990 Farm Bill Title Outline"⁵⁸ fails to apply the concept. Explaining that "...other options may also achieve the policies of the NFU..."⁵⁹, the NFU working paper suggested but voluntary (instead of mandatory), bushel-based supply management in the wheat and feedgrain titles,⁶⁰ and asked for the continuation of the traditional programs for most other commodities. Above all, both the NFU and the NEFC insisted on market-based farm incomes, thus making loan rate increases (with or without mandatory supply management) the primary demand.⁶¹ In deference to budget pressures, both groups suggested targeting devices within mandatory supply management

⁵⁷ National Farmers Union 1989. "Statement of Policy." Printed in Swenson 1989.

⁵⁸ National Farmers Union 1989b. "National Farmers Union Working Paper. 1990 Farm Bill Title Outline." Printed in Swenson 1989.

⁵⁹ National Farmers Union 1989b: 1.

⁶⁰ Installing bushel-based supply management on a voluntary basis perverted the traditional, mandatory supply management concept. A voluntary, bushel-based supply management scheme renounces marketing quotas and does not allow an effective control of supply goals and governmental expenditures (when market prices are intended to be kept stable).

⁶¹ Waller 1989; Swenson 1989.

schemes.⁶²

Gradually, the family farm groups tried to connect to the environmental dimension. During the last years, numerous coalitions had been set up on the state level between member groups of the NFFC and environmental groups, some resulting in the National Toxics Campaign to restrict pesticide use. Symbolically, Willie Nelson's Farm Aid concert in May 1990 portrayed both family farms and the environment as victims of grain business corporations and international trade. On the policy level, the NFU and the NFFC demonstrated support for sustainable agriculture as voluntary approach to environmental problems and demand that base acres should not be lost if farmers want to shift to resource-conserving rotations.⁶³

Whether environmental, conservation and sustainable agriculture groups would go along with the core commodity demands of the NFFC or the NFU seemed questionable. For instance, the Center for Rural Affairs had not supported bushel based supply

⁶² In their summer 1989 statements before the House Committee on Agriculture, the NFFC suggested that "(t)argeting benefits to family-size farmers could be accomplished through certificate allotments." (Waller 1989: 369) The NFU seemed to place a stronger emphasis on targeting: "Tiered marketing quotas, set asides, and price supports, together with realistic overall and per-program limitations should be enacted and effectively enforced on all farm program provisions so program benefits are targeted to small- and medium-sized farmers." (NFU 1989 statement of policy, Article 1) Again, though, the NFU summer 1989 working paper lacked the concrete measures, suggesting but the establishment of "...a cap on the total amounts of loans and target deficiency available to an individual producer." (National Farmers Union 1989b: 4).

⁶³ National Family Farm Coalition 1989. "Family Farm Agenda." Volume 1 (Winter 1989), Issue 1a, p.6; Swenson 1989: 7.

management in the Family Farm Acts in 1985 and 1987, and none of their 1989 and 1990 newsletters⁶⁴ indicated major efforts to take up the issue in the 1990 farm bill. Environmentalists also seemed reluctant to make the connection to supply management goals in the 1990 farm bill. As the Center for Resource Economics' Ken Cook noted, because of the tighter commodity markets and the expectations of an improved farm economy, "the farm policy environment is more volatile now... [thus] it is riskier in 1989 than it was in 1985 to pursue any strategy of environmental reforms that is linked in the short term to the goal of reducing excess capacity in agriculture."⁶⁵

3.4.2. Sustainable agriculture and the environment: reform coalition or "thematic tug-of-war"?

More than the family farm groups, the environmental and sustainable agriculture groups could be expected to go for major or fundamental policy reforms, as their constituent and organizational interests were not as tightly bound to the current program system. Structural changes such as the mainstreaming of environmental values and the scientific recognition of agriculture-related pollution and resource depletion provided

⁶⁴ Center for Rural Affairs newsletter; issues of 1989 and 1990.

⁶⁵ Cook 1989: 3.

some of the preconditions that could open a policy window for an environmental reformation of the farm programs. Several recent studies, such as the 1988 interim report of an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) study on pesticides in groundwater⁶⁶ had suggested some urgency for new policy initiatives. With their "Alternative Agriculture," the National Research Council recommended in September 1989 a commodity program reform of increased base flexibility so that the establishment of resource-conserving rotations would not reduce program payments to sustainable farmers.⁶⁷ In addition, the media embraced the concept of sustainable agriculture. For example, the Washington Post headlined "Organic farming is blossoming. Pollution and costs turn growers away from the use of chemicals"⁶⁸ and the New York Times heralded "Farming without chemicals: Age-old technologies becoming state of the art."⁶⁹

Crucial political support for sustainable agriculture came from Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee Patrick Leahy (D, VT). At the "National Conference on Organic/Sustainable Agriculture Policies"⁷⁰ in March 1989, he called 1989 "the year

⁶⁶ Williams/Holden/Parsons/Lorbert 1988.

⁶⁷ See also General Accounting Office 1990, which supports the National Research Council's conclusions on the necessity of farm program, and specifically commodity program reform.

⁶⁸ Washington Post, November 23, 1987, Page A 3; the article is equating organic with sustainable or alternative agriculture.

⁶⁹ New York Times, August 23, 1987, p.18.

⁷⁰ The conference was organized by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) in Washington, D.C.

of sustainable agriculture" and the 1990 farm bill "the farm bill for sustainability."⁷¹ Echoing the conclusions of the National Research Council, Leahy demanded "...an end to the policy barriers that keep farmers from rotating crops and undertaking other practices that are beneficial to themselves -- and the environment." Policy experts and observers agreed on the potential for environmental and sustainable agriculture issues to play a large role in the 1990 farm bill.⁷²

The public impetus for sustainable agriculture and alternative farm practices seemed to translate into the political realm, as the so-called conservation coalition focused on and formulated environmental, conservation and sustainable agriculture reform efforts. The conservation coalition consisted of a group of Washington-based environmental and conservation lobbyists and professionals with roots in the 1985 farm bill process. In late 1984, a "roundtable" on soil and water conservation had been formed with up to 40 participants from environmental, conservation and consumer groups, but also from some commodity groups, general farm organizations, research institutes, and various administrative and legislative agencies.⁷³ The 1985 environmental and conservation agenda was

⁷¹ Leahy, quoted in Center for Rural Affairs newsletter April 1989: 1.

⁷² For instance, Reichelderfer/Hinkle 1989.

⁷³ The 1984 "roundtable" on soil and water conservation included, among others, the following members: among the environmental groups: American Farmland Trust, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club, Natural

initiated by this group; a core coalition built around the American Farmland Trust, Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council and Sierra Club had considerable input into the actual formulation and passage of the conservation provisions. By 1988, the conservation coalition had developed into a "rather loosely knit coalition"⁷⁴ with some 22 member groups meeting regularly, often under the auspices of the American Farmland Trust. As "semi"-established institution with routines on decision making and leadership procedures, and with some hope for compliance as for the lasting commitments of many participants, the conservation coalition lowered the transaction costs and provided a somewhat "natural" discussion forum for future coalition efforts.

As in 1985, the conservation coalition started to set the 1990 farm bill's environmental and conservation agenda, this time making major inroads into the commodity program arena. At the end of the second legislative session in 1988, the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Conservation, Senator Wyche Fowler (D-GA), had introduced a broad conservation bill⁷⁵ largely drafted by

Resources Defense Council; among the general farm organizations: American Farm Bureau Federation, National Grange; among administrative and legislative agencies: United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Soil Conservation Service (SCS), USDA's Extension Service, USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS); Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Fish and Wildlife Service; Congressional Research Service (CRS); and legislative staff.

⁷⁴ Grossi 1988: 20.

⁷⁵ Wyche Fowler, 'Farm Conservation and Water Protection Act of 1988.' Introduced in Oct. 14, 1988.

conservation coalition members.⁷⁶ Among the bill's key provisions were a sustainable agriculture program granting base flexibility and cost sharing for resource-conserving crops, a groundwater protection program aimed at management plans for low-input practices, an enhanced version of the Conservation Reserve Program, easement options for erodible lands and wetlands, an organic certification and food program, and a farmland protection program. The common denominator of the proposal was its primarily voluntary, incentive-based and educational thrust. Thus, similar to 1985, the conservation coalition's agenda setting initiative indicated some compatibility with agricultural interests as regulatory initiatives were kept modest⁷⁷ and as environmental recoupling proposals had been limited to a voluntary, though potentially far-reaching program opportunity.

"Tug-of-war" within the environmental/conservation and sustainable agriculture community?

Further forums for policy agenda setting and the "floating of ideas" for interest group representatives were provided by the spring rounds of policy seminars on agriculture and the

⁷⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the 'Farm Conservation and Water Protection Act', including the drafting groups, see chapter 4.

⁷⁷ The bill insisted on the stringent implementation of the 1985 soil conservation and wetlands protection provisions and added, as only new initiative, a mandatory pesticide record keeping provision limited to contaminated watersheds.

environment in Washington, D.C.⁷⁸ Contrasting the impression set by the conservation coalition based Fowler bill, interest group representatives and influential experts indicated considerable heterogeneity within the environmental and sustainable agriculture community. Charles M. Benbrook (policy entrepreneur during the 1985 farm bill, and until recently Executive Director of the Board on Agriculture, National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences) predicted in the end of 1988 a "thematic tug-of-war" within the environmental/conservation community: the sustainable production systems' approach, aiming at new incentives and the removal of current program disincentives, versus the water quality protection agenda, aiming at best management practices along conventional, but more scientifically based practices.⁷⁹

Along these lines, Ron Kroese of the Land Stewardship Project, a conceptual core member of the SAC, demanded a fundamental policy reform in the farm program and research area,⁸⁰ whereas environmental/conservation leaders Center for Resource Economic's Ken Cook and National Audubon Society's Maureen Hinkle emphasized source reduction strategies through

⁷⁸ The most prominent seminars were the Institute of Alternative Agriculture sponsored symposium on "Sustainable Farming Systems: Needs and Opportunities", and the already mentioned "CSPI National Conference on Organic/Sustainable Agriculture Policies", both in February 1989. The discussions were carried on in the "Journal for Soil and Water Conservation" and the "American Journal of Alternative Agriculture."

⁷⁹ Benbrook 1988.

⁸⁰ Kroese 1989; see also Hassebrook/Kroese 1990.

regulation and applied technology.⁸¹ Cook introduced the Environmental Stewardship Program (ESP) that presented much of his programmatic thrust at the Institute for Alternative Agriculture sponsored symposium on "Sustainable Farming Systems: Needs and Opportunities." in February 28, 1989.⁸² As successor of the Conservation Reserve Program, the Environmental Stewardship Program would allow farmers to enroll environmentally sensitive lands in 10-15 year contracts and would compensate for production declines in exchange for farmers adopting more environmentally sound and scientifically based practices. Apparently, Cook's approach embraced the idea of technically and bureaucratically geared, regulated farm firms, with compensatory measures translating a genuinely regulative thrust into a more acceptable, distributive program structure.

Besides philosophical differences, the potential "tug-of-war" reflected also the organizational self-interests of the actors. The "technical fix" solutions promised policymaking roles during implementation, monitoring and oversight, whereas commodity program reform which facilitated resource-conserving rotations would increase the demand for sustainable agriculture expertise, research, and extension. The latter would build up the membership strength of the sustainable agriculture groups.

⁸¹ Cook 1989c: 366.

⁸² Cook 1989b: 162.

4. Environmental groups' strategies

Within the 1990 farm bill process, the crucial question was whether the new policy claimants' strategic and substantial interests to coalesce for a fundamental policy reform would hold against organizational "niche" preferences, against inherent coalition weaknesses, and against institutional policymaking biases. Strongest among the identified policy challengers, the environmental groups were the primary agents for fundamental policy change, and were the necessary base for a broader reform coalition. Environmental and sustainable agriculture concerns were raised and negotiated first in the Senate; subsequent strategic alignments guided the course of the entire farm bill legislation.

4.1. The conservation coalition: forum for fundamental policy change?

When the chairman of the Senate conservation subcommittee, Wyche Fowler, set the environmental and conservation agenda with his broad conservation bill in late 1988, the conservation coalition appeared as the organizational forum for a united reform effort of the environmental and sustainable agriculture groups for the 1990 farm bill. The original drafters of the bill mostly represented the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (SAC),

but also the American Farmland Trust, the Audubon Society, the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAP), the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the Center for Resource Economics (CRE), and the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS). With only minor adjustments, Fowler reintroduced the bill in May 1989 as the "Farm Conservation and Water Protection Act."¹ As this initiative was supposed to set the tone for the 1990 discussions, the key provisions are presented in more detail. Fowler's 1989 conservation bill entailed the following:

(A) a broad, incentive based program for low-input, sustainable agriculture including 40 percent base flexibility for resource conserving legumes or legume/small grain mixtures, deficiency payment proliferation on these acres, governmental cost-sharing of legume cover crops on set aside acres, farm demonstration projects, and special federal crop insurance premiums;

(B) a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) based soil conservation proposal including the augmentation of the existing CRP to 60 million acres, further incentives for tree planting, new eligibility criteria allowing for the inclusion of groundwater sensitive areas and wildlife habitats, and easement options for currently enrolled CRP lands;

(C) a wetlands conservation program including more strict implementation mechanisms that would establish punishments for

¹ Wyche Fowler, 'Farm Conservation and Water Protection Act of 1989.' Introduced on May 2nd, 1989. Further on, the bill will be referred to as Fowler two.

the drainage of wetlands, options for wetlands easements, and a wetlands restoration program;

(D) a groundwater protection program including well-testing, either federal technical assistance to develop voluntary low-input management plans or mandatory record keeping of chemical usage in case of contamination, and a monitoring program for contaminated watersheds;

(E) a national organic food program including the establishment of a federal "Organic Food Commission" and the setting of national standards; and

(F) a farmland protection program that would regulate and monitor the usage of farmland for non-agricultural purposes.

The "Farm Conservation and Water Protection Act" reflected the multitude of agriculture-related environmental hazards as much as it reflected organizational priorities and political constraints. As has already been indicated, the bill was compatible with mainstream agricultural interests as it emphasized voluntary, incentive based and educational means, and asked mostly for new, add-on programs. Most importantly, the commodity programs themselves were not questioned. Nevertheless, with governmental support for resource conserving crops on potentially up to about half of the program acreage,² the sustainable agriculture provisions suggested a major step towards

² The acreage that would be supported by payments if planted with resource conserving crops depended on percentage of annual set-asides. The historical range of about 5-15 percent, added to the suggested 40% flexibility scheme on base acreages, amounted to "about" half of the program acreage.

environmental recoupling. Regulatory initiatives were kept modest. The bill insisted on the stringent implementation of the 1985 soil conservation and wetlands protection provisions and added, as only new initiative, a mandatory pesticide record keeping provision, but limited only to contaminated watersheds.

Not surprisingly, the environmental and sustainable agriculture agenda looked politically promising as pushed by Chairman Fowler, and with the co-sponsorship of Patrick Leahy (chairman of the Agriculture Committee), Al Gore (chairman of the Environmental and Energy Study Conference), George Mitchell and Senator Alan Cranston (Senate Majority Leader and Whip).

However, neither programmatic modesty nor early political signs of support would help Fowler and the core drafters of his agenda setting effort to control the future conservation process. While continuously meeting with representatives from the environmental community, Fowler's staff set up regular meetings with commodity group representatives in summer 1989. Fowler's role as the conservation chairman demanded that he negotiate a conservation package with all parties involved. His intent was to get the environmental groups and the commodity groups negotiating early on. Setting the environmental agenda first would allow Fowler to bargain from a united, strong conservation position.³

³ Besides Fowler's genuine desire to maximize environmental and sustainable agriculture benefits of the farm bill (for personal and constituent sympathies with environmental demands and to fulfill the expectations of a conservation subcommittee chairman), his strategy to get the conflicting factions early on to the bargaining table might have been driven by self-centered political reasons. Fowler's control over the environmental

This strategy was supported by the Center for Rural Affairs's Chuck Hassebrook, representing the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

[B]ecause at that point [the commodity groups] ... were very scared of the environmental groups; they wanted to get the environmental issues out of the way so they could focus on their very narrow interests of getting their commodity program payments... [The commodity groups] were willing to give more at that point, to settle the environmental issues and get them worked out."⁴

However, the Fowler staff meetings with the commodity groups catalyzed a political dynamic that was not foreseen or intended by the conservation chairman. In summer 1989, Fowler's staff had sketched for the following arrangement: The "Farm Conservation and Water Protection Act" would set the tone, and then regular meetings with the commodity groups, and the environmental and sustainable agriculture groups would eventually result in a closed bargaining package; everything was to be worked out on the subcommittee level. In August, the first rounds of meetings were set up, with Fowler's staff largely determining the agenda: first

section would have given him considerable influence on the entire farm bill process, as Ken Cook (Center for Resource Economics) noted (comment on a draft of my study in August 1991). Contrasting Fowler's preference for an early-on settlement, he added that the environmental weight in bargainings with the agricultural committees could also be assumed to increase towards the congressional floor decisions.

⁴ Hassebrook.

CRP, then water quality and well-testing. However, after a series of meetings in August and early September, the arrangement fell apart when the main environmental groups, and eventually all of the environmental community, split away from the conservation subcommittee process.

4.2. Environmental departure from Fowler process

Although sometimes mentioned as one reason to depart from the Fowler process, the commodity groups' strong stand in the conservation subcommittee provided only some additional, strategic reasons for crucial environmental leaders to pursue a different agenda, geared in the long run towards an alliance with the (full) committee leadership.

Several factors guided the departure of crucial environmental/conservation groups from the Fowler process. A minority within the environmental interest group community, for instance the Natural Resources Defense Council, felt uncomfortable with the inside strategies demanded by the Fowler process. Obligated to the public interest ideal, they disliked the secret bargaining with the arch-enemy commodity groups, especially at such an early stage of the farm bill process.

Representatives working towards a leadership role had different, strategic reasons to change political allies. Besides personal ambitions, those reasons revolved around the question of

how to make the maximum use of the political resources at hand to achieve organizationally preferred policies within the given political and institutional constraints. What had been identified as representational and institutional biases of the policymaking process started to drive events.

Organization oriented policy selection

At this pivotal stage in summer 1989, organizational self-interests to cultivate "issue niches" and to guarantee the long term inclusion into the agricultural policy network gained more immediate importance. Some of the environmental groups felt rather uncomfortable with, and restricted by the conservation coalition package. Maureen Hinkle and Ken Cook hardly worked any more on the revisions for Fowler's 1989 Farm Conservation and Water Protection Act ("Fowler two").⁵ Cook noted, that "we were so uncertain as to what our agenda was -- the agenda was not "Fowler two". We were so uncertain as to what it was, that we said that we don't want to meet with the commodity groups."⁶

Thus, the championship of large-scale land use changes, and the rather voluntary, incentive based, and educational thrust

⁵ For reasons of convenience, during the 1990 farm bill process Fowler's 1988 Farm Conservation and Water Protection Act was often referred to as "Fowler one" bill, the 1989 Farm Conservation and Water Protection Act as "Fowler two" bill. A conservation bill to be introduced by Fowler in May 1991 (then under the auspices of the commodity groups) was often referred to as the "commodity groups' conservation bill".

⁶ Cook.

mediated and promoted by the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and the American Farmland Trust started to backfire in more visible ways. Since the drafting of Fowler's first conservation bill in late 1988, Ken Cook had been working on a more tangible approach and he found a receptive, or at least compliant audience. The Wildlife Federation together with the Audubon Society were focused on habitat protection. Maureen Hinkle (Audubon Society) had long been working on groundwater issues, and saw mandatory pesticide record keeping on all lands as the key for any regulatory gains. The Sierra Club was at this point internally split on agricultural issues; and as the Washington office did not have an individual lobbyist working exclusively on agricultural issues until late 1989, the Sierra Club seemed to follow the general track pursued by Cook and Hinkle somewhat incidentally. The Natural Resources Defense Council expressed reluctance toward "inside" strategies in general, and leaving the Fowler arrangement in late summer 1989 seemed to be as reasonable as keeping close and permanent contacts to the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. Although the Natural Resources Defense Council endorsed commodity program reforms and land use changes towards sustainable practices, their lobbyists did not try to take over a leadership position nor to make this approach a common denominator within the environmental and conservation interest group community.

Organizational reasons not to stick with the Fowler process were more difficult to determine for many of the smaller

environmental groups with agricultural focus (e.g., American Farmland Trust, Institute for Alternative Agriculture, National Center for Appropriate Technology, and Soil and Water Conservation Society). All were established experts on their specific fields, on which they would be working under whatever political umbrella. However, if the assumption was correct that a broad reform coalition with the sustainable agriculture and the family farm groups could not question the traditional farm bill process, the smaller (agri-) environmental groups would gain more individually if the political resources of the environmental community were concentrated towards narrower environmental goals.

Opportunities in an "issue network with subgovernmental core"

The future environmental leaders based their activities on the premise that "... you can not write a farm bill on the floor."⁷ Besides the representational bias in favor of program based farm bill clienteles (and in disfavor of all potential challengers), the agricultural "issue network with subgovernmental core" was institutionally protected, making efforts to secure substantial parts of the farm bill without committee approval a difficult task. The agricultural committee controlled much of the logrolling process, as their privilege to package the farm bill had created, and could multiply, an "overproportional", congressional floor momentum. Granted a firm,

⁷ Cook.

though insufficient base for the passage of the farm bill, the environmental potential might only be sought to add the marginal votes upon the committee's acceptance. Alternatives to an environmental farm bill could be: a cheap farm bill, an equitable farm bill, or an enlarged farm bill that would create an additional farm bill clientele.

The logic that the agricultural committees could secure Congressional majorities by selectively accommodating dissatisfied interests placed all potential farm bill challengers in a zero-sum-game relationship, and ultimately undermined the conservation coalition's cohesion. If the commodity reform interests such as the sustainable agriculture and family farm groups were not able to split agricultural committees or to challenge their control of the policymaking process on the floor, than narrower environmental interests would compete with them for policy benefits in exchange for Congressional floor support. Under such conditions, commodity reform proposals including Fowler's sustainable agriculture provisions were a waste of political resources for the environmental community. Ken Cook expressed that he worked on the basis of those assumptions, suggesting that a necessary "critical mass within the farming community"⁸ would be needed for commodity program reform. Hypothetically, bushel-based supply management and targeting could fit into an environmental/family farm package, leaving

⁸ Cook.

aside the "very elaborate proposals for commodity reform"⁹ of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. Nonetheless, Cook noted that

you have to decide what the environmental gains are and whether you can make a difference. If you have the National Audubon Society, NRDC, National Wildlife Federation and the Sierra Club, me, and a few other environmental groups sitting around the table, you do have the views of the environmental community, basically, as it is expressed in the legislative process. If you have the NFU, the NEFC, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, and AAM sitting around a table, you have the views of a minority in the agricultural community.¹⁰

Indeed, the problem with the Fowler table was the strong role of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, and their links to family farm and other, social equity oriented groups, for instance Bread for the World and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. The political weight that social equity groups brought into the policymaking process was not strong enough to challenge either the cohesiveness of the agricultural committees or their control of the policymaking process on the floor. Democratic Midwest legislators would hardly challenge the committee internal power structure in favor of market oriented

⁹ Cook.

¹⁰ Cook.

Republicans and Southern Democrats and consequently risk the passage of the farm bill. As one committee staffer expressed it:

The sustainable agriculture provision [in the early Fowler bills] was really a decoupling provision, provided that you adopted certain crop rotation methods. And decoupling was not going to fly, and everybody knew it, and there was no point debating it.¹¹

Even the administration's market driven flexibility proposal did not score better for these very reasons: "the department's [USDA's] proposal in the Green Book had decoupling, and they played it as a sustainable agriculture provision, and it was essentially dead on arrival."¹²

In terms of the floor process, it could be assumed that urban legislators would hardly make major investments for conflictual recoupling demands. The farm crisis had vanished from the media fronts, and targeting would hardly be recognized by urban constituents; on environmental recoupling, the environmental interest groups were largely in a position to shape the political perception on the environmental benefits of the sustainable agriculture agenda. New environmental votes within the urban cluster would hardly be won through making that policy link. In light of their own organizational preferences and the

¹¹ Anonymous Senate Agriculture Committee staffer, August 1990.

¹² Anonymous Senate Agriculture Committee staffer, August 1990.

perceived institutional constraints, crucial environmental representatives left the Fowler process when the committee leadership signaled the willingness to take forward an alternative conservation approach.

Competing committee interests and political opportunities

In addition to the chance to adjust the political demand structure to organizational preferences and to political opportunities and constraints, the departure of core environmental and conservation groups from the conservation subcommittee process was facilitated by competing interests within the agricultural committee. Besides Fowler, the committee chairman Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and ranking member Richard Lugar (R-IN) also had personal and strategic reasons to induce and further the formation of an environmental/conservation agenda under their own auspices, thus offering alternative political channels for the departing environmental groups.

Leahy's critical standing with the commodity groups suggested a broadening of his personal power base. Known for his sympathies, his overt political support of the environmental and conservation community provided for a perfect leverage in the negotiation process on full committee level. Urged by his home state's soil erosion and groundwater problems, also minority Leader Lugar had a personal stake in the conservation issue. He had introduced his own conservation bill, the "Conservation

Enhancement Act", in June 1989,¹³ which was also respected by many environmental representatives and by the majority side.¹⁴ Aside from personal stakes, the committee leadership and their staff had considerable strategic incentives to "control" the environmental agenda, as their reconciliation of the environmental agenda with the commodity programs could add one more constituent to the farm bill package. Their role as committee chairman and ranking member demanded they construct a farm bill majority for the Senate floor.

In turn, the environmental and conservation groups could profit from, but could also lose through the committee internal competition over the farm bill process. Given the conflicting committee setting, the environmental groups could adjoin the committee faction which offered most to them. At the same time, the logic that farm bill majorities used to be sought by selectively accommodate dissatisfied interests demanded for a reliable cooperation with the agricultural committee. For their formal leadership role, chairman Leahy and ranking member Lugar could ensure the passage and enforcement of any program achievements. In addition, as both Senators were known for their environmental and conservational sympathies, their role during floor debates could increase the environmental threat of

¹³ Richard Lugar, 'Conservation Enhancement Act of 1989'. Introduced on May 18, 1989.

¹⁴ Leahy decided not to co-sponsor the Lugar bill, however, as he was publicly bidding on the democratic Fowler bill, introduced just weeks previously.

alliances with more urban oriented Senators. Hence crucial environmental representatives took the chance (and left the Fowler process) when the committee leadership signaled the willingness to take forward an alternative conservation approach.¹⁵

4.3. Formation of environmental/consumer coalition with entrepreneurial help

After the withdrawal from the Fowler table, the environmental community seemed somewhat in disarray about future strategies, with most groups favoring their specific proposals and issue "niches". Nonetheless, within the next few months, a new coalition commonly identified by their policy statement "Farm Bill 1990. Agenda for the Environment and Consumer" (here referred to as "Environmental and Consumer Agenda - Coalition", or just "Agenda Coalition") arose and focused most of the environmental/conservation and food safety/quality oriented consumer efforts to influence the farm bill in 1990.

¹⁵ Chuck Hassebrook from the Center for Rural Affairs, member of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, assessed that Fowler's staff should have sought enduring support from the Committee Chairman (comment on study draft of August 1991). Observing the main environmental groups undermining Fowler's position, his staff assumed that this move was supported by Leahy and they focused their cooperation on the commodity groups. This move from the Fowler office helped Ken Cook (Center for Resource Economics) establish political links to the committee leadership while excluding the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition from the emerging environmental coalition.

The foundation of the new coalition was expedited by the policy entrepreneur Ken Cook and his Center for Resource Economics. With neither membership commitments nor an organizational history, the Center for Resource Economics provided the flexibility to promote and advertise an encompassing, if eclectic, agenda to cultivate communication links between the environmental groups and to explore the political opportunities and constraints with the commodity groups, USDA officials and the agricultural committees. Besides the organizational base, Cook's personal background as soil scientist, journalist and charismatic speaker enabled Cook to focus the range of environmental and conservation interests and to lead the future environmental coalition in press conferences and at the bargaining tables during later farm bill stages in 1990.

In his seminar paper "Consider the Source", Cook had laid out much of the conceptual groundwork for an alternative environmental agenda with more immediate, tangible environmental benefits. Preconceiving the political constraints, Cook developed a conservation agenda that was not only more in line with the organizational interests of crucial environmental/conservation groups, but was also highly compatible with the commodity programs and the "iron rule of inter-commodity accommodation". For instance, source reduction strategies within the Environmental Stewardship Program (ESP) aimed at the worst pollution and resource depletion sites, but would leave untouched

the economic incentives for intensive and specialized practices at large. The ESP could be targeted regionally and promised therefore bargaining space and agreements within the agricultural constituency.

As the sustainable agriculture agenda could potentially hamper future negotiations with commodity interests, Cook promulgated his agenda as a fundamental alternative to the sustainable agriculture provisions as they were written into the Fowler bills. In his analysis of potential commodity program reforms, Cook implied that base flexibility and cost-share for conservation crops would discriminate against current cattle, forage, and small grains producer, implying "incompatibility" with the farm bill power structure. He repeated his claim that a change in the economic incentive structure at large would achieve less tangible environmental benefits than a program concentrating on the worst land use practices. Therefore, it might be more equitable and efficacious ... to improve upon the CRP concept, perhaps along the lines of ESP, than to attempt ... reform of constantly changing commodity programs."¹⁶ The first criterion in Cook's suggested "guidelines for policy reform in 1990" - "How much will the proposal cost and where will the money come from?"¹⁷ - is illustrated with the main recoupling proposal in the Fowler one bill. "How much would it cost to confer commodity

¹⁶ Cook 1989b: 164.

¹⁷ Cook 1989b: 165.

program status on production of legumes or legume-small grain mixtures? Will funding come via transfers from existing commodity programs or merely compete with them, increasing outlays?"¹⁸ The implication is clear: with a tight budget, and powerfully guarded commodity programs, the political resources of the environmental and conservation groups should be focused more cautiously. By implying that the proposals were mutually exclusive alternatives, Cook apparently aimed at the replacement of the sustainable agriculture with organizationally preferred, and politically more promising alternatives.

In October 1989, Cook took the initiative again by inviting representatives of the major environmental and conservation groups for some first rounds of informal discussions on their future course. Those first meetings were directed towards a future environmental coalition more compatible with political opportunities. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was explicitly excluded, pointing also at leadership questions, as the round could have headed for a new course notwithstanding the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's differences. To put it in simple terms, various environmental/conservation groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council, and to various degrees the Sierra Club, the American Farmland Trust, the Institute for Alternative Agriculture and the Soil and Water Conservation Society sympathized with the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's recoupling proposals, thus questioning the new course formulated

¹⁸ Cook 1989b: 165.

by Ken Cook and Maureen Hinkle. Among the core members of the future environmental coalition, Ken Cook seemed to have some predominance on technical expertise and on the capability to communicate with main stream interests because of his personal and organizational background. Together with Maureen Hinkle, they comprised the unquestioned expertise on farm bill legislation as both had followed the process already for three terms. As the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition lobbyists represented a similar potential in technical and policymaking terms, they could question the new leadership at all levels. And, as the new environmental/conservation leaders had their own, different policy network especially with the Senate majority staff, these exclusive political channels were to strengthen the new leadership of the emerging environmental coalition (the Agenda Coalition).

Cook's and Hinkle's strategy proved successful, as the other political heavyweights, the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council, were either internally at odds (Sierra Club), or not able or willing to take over a political leadership role. Specifically the Natural Resources Defense Council was handicapped within the emerging coalition, as its Alar "history" made it an unacceptable counterpart for the agricultural establishment, and therefore a threat to other groups' intentions to demonstrate programmatic flexibility for a settlement with the

agricultural committees.¹⁹ Many farm bill observers had expected that the American Farmland Trust take over a leading position because of their engagement in the conservation coalition and the 1985 farm bill process. During the coalition formation process in mid to end 1989, however, the American Farmland Trust did not work towards a strategic leadership role within the environmental community, or did not attract the attention other groups did. As with most of the membership-weaker participants, the inclusion of organizationally prioritized policy demands seemed to make all group representatives comply rather willingly with the new political course.

Some time in December, the participants agreed on the importance of a common policy statement, one reason being that the conservation subcommittee chairman Senator Fowler and the commodity groups were said to be close to introducing an independent conservation bill. Fowler was in fact stuck with the commodity groups, and, as a committee staffer described it, "for the sake of political credibility"²⁰ Fowler's staff had to work eventually towards a third, now orthodox conservation bill. As the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition had continued to work with Fowler, some environmental representatives feared that a subcommittee agreement between the Sustainable Agriculture

¹⁹ Because of the Alar incident, "Representatives of some other environmental and conservation groups agree privately that the NRDC's inclusion in the coalition is like waving a red flag at farmers."; Antham (Feb. 25) 1990.

²⁰ Anonymous Senate Agriculture Committee staffer, November 1990.

Coalition and the commodity groups could undermine the impetus of the environmental groups and drain environmental capital. A common agenda statement of the major environmental/conservation groups would challenge all existing or expected conservation proposals, that is, Fowler's and Lugar's bills of summer 1989, the expected commodity groups' conservation bill under Fowler, and the administration's proposal. In consequent negotiations, Leahy was to take over a leadership role, being now in a position to openly depart from Fowler's endeavors. Most importantly, with the environmental community appearing as somewhat coherent and reliable force for political bargaining, the crucial precondition for committee negotiations under Leahy's auspices would be fulfilled.

For all of the promises of a common agenda paper, the member groups reconciled some of their internal differences and put together the "Farm Bill 1990. Agenda for the Environment and Consumer."²¹ in the amazingly short period of a few weeks, timing their publication at the Administration's proposal, the so-called "Green Book" in February 6.²² The "Environmental and Consumer Agenda - Coalition" (Agenda Coalition) timed their press conference on the same day and got an unprecedented press coverage by portending a farm bill duel between "the environmentalists" versus federal agricultural policymakers. The Los Angeles Times grasped the dramatic of the events on the front

²¹ Environmental and Consumer Agenda - Coalition 1990.

²² USDA 1990.

page of their business section:

At 9 a.m. Tuesday (Feb. 6, 1990), a coalition of consumer and environmental groups told a news conference that farmers should get no money from the federal government unless there are strong environmental and food safety strings attached. An hour later, Secretary Yeutter launched the Bush Administration's farm bill with a set of proposals that will try, he said, to 'balance the need for an abundant, safe and affordable food supply with conservation and improvement of our environment'. And a few blocks away, the American Farm Bureau Federation staff spent the day defending the much embattled conventional farmer. 'I sincerely believe that farmers are conservation minded,' says Mark Maslyn, the bureau's assistant director for national affairs. 'It bothers people that they are being labelled as environmental polluters.'²³

Other, national newspapers followed and spent as much attention on "the environmentalists" as on USDA, highlighting the potential conflict.²⁴ With this coverage, the environmental vote potential had significantly increased. The Agenda Coalition established itself as the main threat to the traditional farm

²³ La Ganga 1990.

²⁴ Lancaster 1990; Holmes 1990; Knight-Ridder News Service 1990.

policy makers²⁵ (besides a fiscal conservative/urban liberal assault launched later in the House) and created a climate that demanded a settlement of environmental and conservation issues within the agricultural committees. The Agenda Coalition had at the same time monopolized the environmental political capital, as the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition lost public attention and their "farmer environmentalist" status.

The new environmental agenda

The policy demands set out in the Agenda Coalition's agenda statement reflected nevertheless the multitude of organizational positions had to be taken into consideration. Although new policy initiatives were added, the agenda did not fundamentally depart from the agenda set out in Fowler's 1988 and 1989 conservation bills, as the Natural Resources Defense Council, and to some degree the American Farmland Trust and the Sierra Club insisted on policy reforms that would facilitate sustainable practices. "Price support, direct payment, acreage reduction, and base acreage rules that discriminate against resource-conserving crop rotations should be phased out within the cycle of the 1990 farm bill. In addition, commodity programs and federally subsidized

²⁵ The label 'traditional farm policy makers' (instead of 'traditional farm bill interests') is used intentionally in order to include the free market oriented Agriculture Secretary Yeutter, who was an outspoken opponent of the commodity programs and other, trade distorting programs, but shared the fear of any environmental regulation.

crop insurance should be made more flexible for farmers who wish to diversify their cropping patterns in ways that conserve natural resources and reduce the use or generation of pollutants."²⁶ Though written in somewhat ambiguous terms, the statement avoided explicit, across the board reform demands, but rather implied commodity program reform to be a specific policy tool for some farmers willing to change cropping patterns, as it had been suggested in Fowler's early conservation bills.

The determining program element was the "Environmental Stewardship Program" (ESP), which Cook had promoted as a specific alternative to commodity program reforms because of its capacity to be targeted at the worst land use practices and environmental hazards while ensuring flexibility in the political realm. The Environmental Stewardship Program had become the character of an environmental umbrella program, including (like the early Fowler bills) multi-year contracts and easement options for groundwater sensitive areas and wetlands, and restoration options of wetlands. The water quality section went a clear step beyond the somewhat half-hearted Fowler approach by its mandatory language; it demanded the "Implementation of source reduction practices and systems in areas where pesticides, fertilizer, sediment or animal waste impairs water quality."²⁷

Other program elements outside the commodity section and the Environmental Stewardship Program reflected many other

²⁶ Environmental and Consumer Agenda - Coalition 1990: 19.

²⁷ Environmental and Consumer Agenda - Coalition 1990: 19.

organizational priorities: stringent implementation and improvements on the 1985 conservation title, mandatory pesticide and fertilizer record-keeping ("record-keeping"), food labelling reforms ("cosmetics"), national organic food standards ("organics"), and research and extension reforms emphasizing systems research and Integrated Pest Management.

Though setting some new initiatives, the policy proposal was rather moderate and eclectic, thus reflecting the shortcomings of a coalition of heterogenous organizational interests that lacked mechanisms to ensure coherent policy positions and long-term commitments. The Food and Fiber Letter, representing a mainstream agriculture voice, sensed the Agenda Coalition's demands to be not as "restrictive as many had been fearing", though "it's bound to stimulate some farm country opposition, especially to record-keeping proposals."²⁸ Further explanation was mainly on the water quality section for its potential broad implications. In fact, water quality and record keeping were to become key issues, reflecting the new programmatic thrust towards cheap, technically oriented, site and problem specific measures with tangible, short term environmental benefits. Family farm and equity issues did not appear, and meetings with the family farm groups two weeks before the presentation of the Agenda Coalition's policy statement were not geared at a substantial coordination.²⁹

²⁸ Food and Fiber Letter February 5: 2-3.

²⁹ Two meetings in late January between the family farm and environmental groups (initiated by the environmental groups) were held in a rather conspicuous atmosphere. Environmental

Leahy and the majority staff followed the formation period of the environmental coalition closely and signaled the conditions under which they could put their weight behind a united environmental proposal. The coordination was successful. At their news conference in February 6 the Agenda Coalition issued a Leahy statement that the coalition's suggestions "will be an important part of the debate over the 1990 farm bill and will be taken seriously."³⁰ Agweek summarized mainstream fears, reporting the contentious nature of these proposals within the agricultural committee, but pointing at Leahy's floor potential on environmental issues, as he had recently stopped the nomination of the conservative James Cason as assistant agriculture secretary against the committee vote.³¹ Controlling the environmental agenda, Leahy was now in a position to take initiative and to work towards a committee "deal" with the environmental interest groups.

Midterm evaluation of the new environmental coalition

With the Agenda Coalition's independent political agenda and

representatives felt that the family farm groups had already taken sides in meeting with Fowler's staff in mid-January. Rather than striving for a strategic coalition, the purpose of the meeting was to have the family farm groups not overtly opposing the new environmental agenda, and to find out about the stage of the parallel negotiations under Fowler's regime; see also chapter 6.

³⁰ Leahy, quoted in Hillgren 1990: 26.

³¹ Hillgren 1990.

their orientation towards the committee leadership, the "switch" was set against a broad reform coalition with the sustainable agriculture and the family farm groups. Rather than activating environmental legislators for disputes on the Senate floor and building a public base to recouple farm payments, the Agenda Coalition based their strategies on insurmountability of the traditional farm bill forces and consequently knocked politely at the committee doors.

With the agricultural committees presumably in the position to buy out policy challengers for a farm bill majority, agricultural policymaking among those policy challengers became a zero-sum-game. To be part of the farm bill vehicle, the Agenda Coalition's leadership built an agenda that was highly compatible with the traditional farm programs, being technically oriented, site and problem specific while allowing inter-regional and inter-commodity accommodation. With the exception of record keeping, major regulatory devices were avoided in favor of distributive, new program turf.

The Agenda Coalition fulfilled two further preconditions that allowed to be part of the farm bill vehicle, both concerning the nature of their coalition. The coalition proved their ability to compromise and to speak with one voice during their agenda setting efforts. The coalition could be expected to defend "deals" once agreed to. Second, the Agenda Coalition was encompassing enough to be considered "the" environmental voice, thus providing the maximum political support in the media, for

the floor vote, and in negotiations with the administration. The eleven member Agenda Coalition seemed to materialize all of the potential benefits of a coalition, being able to capture the overall environmental capital. Seen in this light, Cook's role as "free-wheeling" policy entrepreneur proved rather indispensable to form, and to provide closure to the heterogenous environmental interest group landscape.

4.4. "Smooth" policymaking access in Senate

The formation of a new coalition and a united agenda provided a necessary condition for a compromise with the traditional farm bill forces. The critical questions were, whether "the environmentalists" were needed to ensure a the farm bill passage, what their potential floor damage was if they were ignored, and whether alternative, more acceptable alternatives were available. With the media coverage and the resulting floor potential, the Agenda Coalition's weight could considerably improve the farm bill's fortune, and with the personal stakes of the committee leadership, it seemed rather promising that both Leahy and Lugar would work towards reconciling the differences with Fowler, the commodity groups, and the Agenda Coalition.³²

³² By providing Ken Cook and Maureen Hinkle the opportunity to testify before the Agricultural Production and Stabilization of Prices subcommittee, the committee leadership had already in fall 1989 taken the first steps towards "bridging" the gap between commodity interests and the environmental groups;

At a critical stage in late January/February when the commodity groups were close to introducing their orthodox conservation bill, Leahy's and Lugar's staffs went into a series of meetings and warned that introducing the proposal "would ruin any hope of a forging a compromise with environmental groups on conservation issues."³³ The suggestions especially on swampbuster, but also on conservation compliance and CRP would not pass the Senate floor. The introduction of a commodity groups' conservation bill could provoke a counter bill from the environmental side already at the committee level and could lead to a split within the membership.³⁴

Taking the warnings seriously, Fowler reworked his bill and tried to broaden its support. Loading the bill with regional benefits helped to increase the support base within the committee. Outside allies included the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and the family farm groups.³⁵ As the membergroups of the Agenda Coalition did not respond to his courting, Fowler closed the bill in mid March and circulated drafts. The media coverage was rather disastrous, however. Siding now with the commodity groups and pushing their hardline (anti-) conservation

Cook/Hinkle 1989.

³³ Kirchhoff 1990, referring to 'industry and congressional sources'.

³⁴ Clout 1990 (March 17).

³⁵ SAC collaborated with Fowler throughout the farm bill process. The family farm groups joined the Fowler/commodity groups' preparation for a conservation bill after an unsuccessful January 1990 meeting with ECAC.

agenda looked like heresy for Fowler who used to be praised for his environmental endeavor. Besides his environmental credibility, the press also questioned his otherwise praised political skills:

Fowler's bill has precipitated an early clash among environmentalists, farm groups, and members of Congress, casting a pall over hopes for an early compromise on a range of soil- and water- conservation issues... (With) the influence of the Senate Agriculture committee leadership... (at stake, the Fowler draft) could split the agriculture committee.³⁶

With this press coverage, a stronger role of the committee leadership became imperative. Betting on a settlement with the committee, this press coverage was also the kind the Agenda Coalition needed to increase their vote potential.

After another 3 weeks, the bill was finally introduced as "Conservation Promotion Act of 1990"³⁷ in April 3 by Senators Fowler and Dole with the co-sponsorship of another 11 members of the 19 member agriculture committee. The most controversial issues of the Fowler/commodity groups' conservation bill within the range of the old, 1985 farm bill agenda were on wetlands protection: exemption of the swampbuster rules for those wetlands

³⁶ Clout 1990 (March 17): 830.

³⁷ Wyche Fowler, "Conservation Promotion Act of 1990", introduced in April 3.

that had been farmed for at least six out of ten years between 1975 and 1985; limitation of penalties for swampbuster violators instead of the total payment loss; permission to convert wetlands if previously drained wetlands are restored in place; exemption of small wetlands from the swampbuster rules; narrow wetlands easement options. Major differences within the old agenda existed also on the Conservation Reserve Program and conservation compliance: post-CRP land exemptions from conservation compliance; standards for eligibility that were targeted at a inter-regional balance of benefits rather than environmental needs, and soil loss standards that basically acknowledged all of SCS's weakening decisions and made compliance rather meaningless. Differences with environmental ideas outside the 1985 provisions seemed to be as significant, as the Fowler/commodity groups' conservation bill ignored most of the Agenda Coalition's new policy issues, including water quality initiatives. "If the committee is going to ignore water quality, as the commodity groups and the administration ignored water quality, that becomes a problem for us."³⁸

Towards a committee level compromise

Besides the attempt to impede the introduction of the Fowler/commodity groups' conservation bill, Leahy and Lugar took initiative in a second manner in order to assure the

³⁸ Cook, quoted in Clout 1990 (March 17): 832.

environmental vote on the side of the traditional farm bill constituency. Since late January and February, Leahy's and Lugar's staff were drafting an independent version of the future conservation title. The Agenda Coalition's leadership could widely influence the agenda, as the staff orders were to work out a compromise with the environmental leadership - within given, "higher level" political restraints, that is within the need to stay in the limits of what was potentially acceptable to the commodity groups.

In contrast to the rather eclectic agenda paper, the situation now demanded a first clarification of internal priorities. Given that, it was helpful to have the leadership staff drafting the conservation bill and thus avoiding internal turf battles and a public scoring of internal and subsequent external negotiations rounds. The Agenda Coalition efforts towards an own bill were rather fragmentary anyway, as much attention and staff work seemed to be preoccupied with fighting the Fowler bill in the late February/March period,³⁹ so that having Senate staffers doing much of the technical work was much in the coalition's self-interest.

Drafting and potentially introducing a bill by Leahy or Lugar, rather than betting on a proposal of the Agenda Coalition, was also politically favorable for the committee leadership. Instead of public fights, the leadership could uphold that they were "controlling" the environmental agenda, and considerable

³⁹ Land Letter March 20.

flexibility was left to the staff level negotiations. The Agenda Coalition did not introduce an independent bill, and the political ramifications were kept largely at the committee and staff level.

When the full committee staff started to draft the markup versions for the individual titles of the farm bill in late March and April, the Agenda Coalition and the majority staff made decisive scores for the inclusion of their agenda on the farm bill. It became clear that a number of co-sponsors of the Fowler/commodity groups' bill were not convinced that a commodity proposal on conservation could pass without the support of the committee leadership. As the main interest was to secure commodity program payments, and as the Agenda Coalition/leadership's agenda respected that, most committee members were willing to compromise in the conservation arena as that was to strengthen the farm bill as a whole. Some suspicion prevailed, though, whether a reliable bargain for the floor vote was possible, as the agricultural establishment faced "environmental terrorists" (referring mainly to the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Alar case) and a Leahy who might "sell out" on the floor. On the other hand, the environmental side was aware of the traditional hostility of the agricultural committee on environmental issues, and suspicious about the political channels and clout of the commodity groups. As one environmental lobbyist noted: "I have no PAC money to throw around."

The trust building efforts succeeded, however, with Leahy and Lugar and their staff starring in negotiations. Keeping the commodity groups at the table was mainly the task of the majority staff, emphasizing that Leahy was committed to have whatever committee version that was to be worked out pass the floor without any further maneuvers. However, the key for the commodity groups to go into serious negotiation rounds was within the environmental community. By now, the Agenda Coalition had demonstrated the capability to internally compromise and speak with one voice. With the staff assurance that the environmentalists were willing to settle with a compromise, negotiations became promising. As one top level Senate aide phrased it: "The breakthrough came when Leahy promised no floor votes from the environmentalists."⁴⁰

On the other side, the Agenda Coalition kept on doing the "inside job" for which their leadership had carefully prepared. The Agenda Coalition at that point was conducting a double strategy by privately indicating the willingness to compromise, but publicly upholding the possibility of floor votes. The consequent media coverage on the clash between the commodity groups and "the environmentalists" increased the coalition's momentum. Nevertheless, the Agenda Coalition leadership was aware of the institutional resources of the traditional farm bill forces and worked towards a political settlement with the

⁴⁰ Clout (May 5): 1345. Environmental representatives insisted that, at any stage of the process, the agreement to renounce on floor votes covered only a limited number of issues.

committee. Less compromise-oriented coalition members were worked by the majority staff who emphasized the unpredictability of floor votes. In contrast to the House, Senate opposition forces against the farm bill were rather weak, and the Agenda Coalition consequently did not even try to pretend that alternative majorities for larger parts of the farm bill were possible.

As the farm bill passage did not seem to depend on the environmental vote, and as floor votes were inherently risky and resource consuming, the Agenda Coalition leadership worked towards a compromise. Specifically, the Agenda Coalition needed an early-on settlement that would further their credibility and potential as new farm bill constituent, and the coalition needed enough backing from within the committee that a compromise once reached would pass all other political stages. As one environmentalist phrased it: "the key will be that Leahy and Lugar come together."⁴¹ The minority leader was in fact a good target, as his family farm, erosion plagued Indiana background made Lugar a sympathizer with recoupling issues. For that reason, other Republican members and the commodity groups would rather appease Lugar in the conservation section in order to have him go along (Republican) party lines in the commodity section.

After all sides were able to make credible their interest in a committee settlement, the staff negotiated the mark-up version for the conservation title within the next few weeks. In substantial terms, the staff draft and on its basis the actual

⁴¹ Land Letter March 20: 4.

markup on May 2 and 3, entailed a compromise on some of the most contentious issues, and the deal was simple: "No floor votes" on this limited range of issues.⁴² The main conflict was on wetlands protection, a clear win-lose situation. To recall, the Fowler bill had suggested an exemption from the swampbuster rules for those wetlands that have been farmed for at least six out of ten years between 1975 and 1985; further weakening efforts were on penalty reform, and other exemptions from swampbuster. Environmentalists were especially upset about the weakening of swampbuster but tried to gain in exchange wetlands easement options, and, most importantly, something in water quality.

The commodity-environmental compromise

As major environmental achievements, the compromise reached on wetlands protection entailed no "six out of ten" drainage exemption⁴³ and made the drainage of wetlands (instead of the actual cultivation) the trigger mechanism for payment withdrawal or fine. The further arrangements on drainage reflect the political "give and take": agricultural producers would be allowed to drain minimal-ecological-effect wetlands when wetlands

⁴² Some interviewees held that the compromise with the Senate agriculture committee on May 2 and 3 did not preclude from later floor votes. Only swampbuster, which was probably the most contentious issue, was said to have been agreed finally resolved.

⁴³ The "six out of ten" rule would have exempted up to 71% of North Dakota's wetlands, 58% of South Dakota's and 29% of Minnesota's; Duston 1990.

of same ecological value are restored, to drain seasonal wetlands that had been extensively farmed when drainage has only minimal effects on ecology and wildlife habitats, and to plant seasonal wetlands that had not been drained. The compromise lessened the penalties for first-time violators down from total program payment denial to \$1,000 - \$10,000, evoking hopes that implementation would thus improve. Furthermore, wetlands easement options were provided for up to 1 million acres of wetlands eligible for Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) payments. For its broadened range, the CRP was actually renamed the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), in part following Cook's suggestion.

On the Agenda Coalition's insistence, the compromise also included new policy initiatives on water quality. Most importantly, a water quality incentive program was established that reflected best the environmental thrust of applied technology and government-financed regulation. USDA's Soil Conservation Service (SCS) would assist producers in developing management plans to reduce inputs; these producers could receive up to \$3,500 annually to implement the plans. Furthermore, the eligibility of the CRP/CSP was opened to groundwater and surface water sensitive areas such as wellheads, cropland underlaid with karst, and cropland in important watershed areas.

With these results, all sides could claim victories. The commodity groups were especially pleased with the graduated sanction provisions, and also the wetlands language allowed more flexibility than the 1985 rules. Regulatory approaches had been

avoided, at least within the closed bargaining package. All of the new Conservation Stewardship Program language, and even the water quality section was voluntary, incentive based. Most importantly, however, agricultural producers had succeeded in keeping "the environmentalists" out of the discussions on commodity programs. In contrast, the environmental and conservation groups would still have direct incentives to defend the commodity programs as swampbuster and conservation compliance violations was at least in part enforced with payment withdrawals.

The Agenda Coalition leadership praised the process and its results with little restraint, as their year-long preparations started to pay: "These were artful, reasonable compromises",⁴⁴ with Leahy and Lugar getting the best grades: "It's miraculous what (Leahy) has done."⁴⁵ (Leahy and Lugar) showed real statesmanship."⁴⁶ And the media echoed: "Through a combination of subtle threats, pure power, and teamwork with environmental groups, Leahy has pulled the .. conservative committee toward environmental issues in ways few in Washington can remember."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Cook, quoted in Pins 1990.

⁴⁵ Williams (National Wildlife Federation), quoted in Ellis 1990.

⁴⁶ Cook, quoted in Antham 1990b.

⁴⁷ Ellis 1990.

Organizational priorities and the Agenda Coalition's cohesion

The focus on wetlands and water seemed to indicate a coalition internal power structure. The Center for Resource Economics, Audubon Society and the Wildlife Federation had increasingly monopolized the leadership and represented the Agenda Coalition during the Senate committee negotiations, with some role of the Sierra Club. The American Farmland Trust seemed to complement the formal negotiations with internal, private links to several Senate offices. The three traditional, member-strong conservation groups were the political heavyweights, and with the Sierra Club's only recent hiring of a permanent farm bill lobbyist and its internal divisions on the narrow environmental versus the sustainable agriculture orientation, the Wildlife Federation and Audubon Society remained the key players besides the Center for Resource Economics. At this stage, Ken Cook (Center for Resource Economics) benefitted increasingly from his organizational flexibility and his broad political network. His journalist background gave him privileged media access, and he alone was a more quoted speaker in the mainstream press for the Agenda Coalition during the farm bill process than all of his colleagues together.⁴⁸

Even though the coverage of the committee settlement seemed to indicate different, the Agenda Coalition leadership could not use other issues as "bargaining chips" to achieve their core

⁴⁸ This result is based on the analysis of Associated Press, the Washington Post, and the Congressional Quarterly Weekly.

agenda. Rather the opposite was the case, at least at the early process stages. The agricultural committees needed a cohesive negotiation party that promised reliance on the floor. As there existed no compliance mechanisms within the environmental coalition, it was in the Agenda Coalition's self interest to provide all groups with higher benefits to stay as their best alternatives could offer. All "niche" issues had to be forwarded simultaneously.

To the service of the Agenda Coalition's internal stability, the committee leadership played the function of a facilitator and arbitrator when priorities had to be formulated in the bargaining process. Leahy in fact pushed simultaneously for a range of issues: pesticide record-keeping, circle of poison, organics, cosmetics, and farmland protection to satisfy all organizational needs. Although these issues were not part of the compromise with the agricultural committees, all of them were tackled in committee, with options open for future changes and floor amendments from both sides. Organics was approved in April 27, one week before the core markups on conservation.⁴⁹ A mini-version of record-keeping that was to cover only use-restricted pesticides and limited data access was included in Leahy's conservation markup and approved by the committee. This mini-version was unacceptable to the Audubon Society and others and so no pledge was made on a floor commitment. Leahy's markup-vehicle included also a farmland protection provision promoted by the

⁴⁹ Committee on Agriculture 1990.

American Farmland Trust and was accepted in committee without debate. The Sierra Club's champion circle of poison⁵⁰ was subjected to hefty committee fights visibly since mid-May. In June 6, Leahy acquired all Democratic votes for a compromise version,⁵¹ that exempted those unregistered pesticides from the proposed export ban for which the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has established residue tolerance levels in foods. Cosmetics with backing from the Natural Resources Defense Council and Public Voice passed as part of the same vote.⁵²

Floor passage by supporting the package; no environmental capital left

As the committee leadership had taken their mission seriously, the farm bill passed the Senate floor without major surprises. Given their primary goals of access and inclusion in the policymaking arena, the Agenda Coalition had no incentives to question the conservation title. All of the organizational priorities of the more vocal coalition member groups had been tackled in committee and compromises were achieved with Leahy's support.

Leahy had in fact bargained the highest overall reward

⁵⁰ To recall, the circle of poison provision aimed at prohibiting the export of pesticides not registered in the U.S.

⁵¹ Clout 1990 (June 9).

⁵² Committee on Agriculture 1990: 411.

possible in exchange for the legitimacy and vote boost the environmental community offered to the farm bill. This became clear when the Agenda Coalition tried to strengthen two regulatory issues, pesticide recordkeeping and conservation compliance on the Senate floor. While much of the coalition's staff resources were bound in pre-floor negotiations with the House agricultural committee in May to mid-July, the Audubon Society and other groups wanted to have the committee, "mini-pesticide record version in the Senate expanded to cover all pesticides (instead of only covering use-restricted pesticides as proposed) and to guarantee data access to health professionals, farm workers, and the general public. The environmental hopes proved mistaken, though, as high-level politics began to drive events. The agricultural committee mobilized a counter-letter signed by 53 Senators, many of which belonged to the traditional environmental strongholds. Lugar threatened that all "deals" would be off if recordkeeping were to come on the floor. With too much to lose, the Agenda Coalition preferred to retreat. In spite of support from "environmental, labor and consumer groups, and the National Farmers Union",⁵³ the Agenda Coalition's champion Senator Frank R. Lautenberg (D-NJ) renounced his amendment on the Senate floor, saving face only by getting a Leahy colloquy to work in conference towards data access for those with a

⁵³ Lautenberg, quoted in Congressional Record (July 27): S 10931.

"legitimate need".⁵⁴

The Agenda Coalition's second floor issue followed a similar pattern. Like recordkeeping, conservation compliance was a politically expensive issue. Unlike recordkeeping, though, conservation compliance had no vocal issue representatives, and had thus been virtually ignored at the committee level. For its regulatory nature, several groups had also assumed that conservation compliance would better be forwarded in pre-floor negotiations. Especially the American Farmland Trust and the Center for Resource Economics pressed harder now and found in Senator Robert Kasten (R-WI) a strong champion. However, when it came close to the actual floor vote, Kasten had to compromise with the committee by stripping his amendment by its two key provisions on acceptable soil loss levels and on making post-CRP land subject to the sodbuster rule.⁵⁵

Several reasons had led to the environmental defeat on conservation compliance. The Agenda Coalition lost much of their leverage (in the Senate) because of a legislative staff error on the House side,⁵⁶ where a negotiated conservation bill was recognized out of order. The environmental staff resources had become increasingly overcharged during the last minute, pre-floor

⁵⁴ Leahy in Congressional Record (July 27): S 10933.

⁵⁵ Congressional Record (July 27): S 10935-S 10939.

⁵⁶ The pre-floor negotiations took place simultaneously in the House and in the Senate. For the need to reconcile differences in the agriculture-dominated conference, only similar provisions promised final passage.

negotiations with the agricultural committees (parallel in both chambers) and in attempts to mobilize for floor votes. In a more general sense, the Agenda Coalition was not able to counter-mobilize against the Senate committee, as they had already bought deeply into the farm bill logic. The Agenda Coalition's political impetus had diminished when it was clear that "the environmentalists" could not afford anymore to label the entire farm bill "anti-environmental". After all of the concessions achieved so far, critique could only be limited to technical details of individual issues; this was not anymore the language needed for major media mobilization.

The Agenda Coalition's strategies and role in the Senate side

The fundamental precondition for the Agenda Coalition's policymaking access and their "ticket" on the farm bill vehicle was the willingness to adjust the political demands to the conditions set by the traditional farm bill forces. The Agenda Coalition leadership read the political signals correctly and developed an accommodational agenda in close cooperation with the majority staff. That was all the more possible, as all of the organizational priorities of the coalition membergroups were in fact geared towards what was politically achievable in the agricultural policymaking network. The publication of a common agenda statement and the early negotiations rounds demonstrated internal cohesion, so that the Agenda Coalition fulfilled also

the "formal qualifications" of a reliable bargaining partner that would carry a "deal" through the Senate floor.

With those strategic choices and with Leahy, and to some degree Lugar, turning out as close allies, most decisions were implicitly made on the use of the political resources to influence policymaking. The Agenda Coalition did not need to demonstrate strength through large scale grassroots mobilization. Not a single letter-writing campaign, nor public protest activities were launched. Rather, political muscles were demonstrated on a symbolic level. The Agenda Coalition attracted considerable (mainstream) media attention during all of the process, with the highlight on the duel between the commodity groups and "the environmentalists". Sustainable or alternative agriculture disappeared from the headlines after the Agenda Coalition press conference in February 8.⁵⁷ To demask current farming practices as threat to the nation's ground- and drinking water was an emotionally moving topic, and in combination with pesticide related food safety concerns, a foremost public concern was enhanced during the farm bill debates. Most importantly, when Fowler circulated and introduced the commodity groups's conservation bill in mid-March and early April, the Agenda Coalition had been able to mobilize a devastating press reaction.

⁵⁷ The newspaper selection on which this contention is based is the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Congressional Quarterly Weekly. Even the Des Moines Register, in spite of their attention to sustainable agriculture activities in 1989 and early 1990, gradually focused on the dichotomy ECAC versus the commodity groups in their farm bill coverage during spring 1990.

The Agenda Coalition's strategy to mobilize the media on the commodity groups-environmental groups duel while simultaneously betting on a committee settlement had clear limitations. The question asked in public was not how much or what kind of environmental provisions the farm bill would contain. Rather, it was on whether the farm will was going to be an "environmental farm bill" versus "not an environmental farm bill". Under the circumstances, it seemed to be a question whether Ken Cook would give his blessings in press statements. Leahy played on that capital and got the provisions in committee upon the environmental threat on the floor, and, on a deeper level, on the promise that the environmental vote would boost the legitimacy and provide the marginal votes for the passage of the farm bill. However, as soon as the Agenda Coalition had bought into the farm commodity provisions, their ammunition was gone. With the focus on narrow, symptom level oriented provisions such as wetlands protection, water pollution and record-keeping, their vote trading potential was exhausted after the committee internal compromises.

4.5. Policymaking access in urban House

The strategic situation in the House of Representatives was more favorable for broad reform coalitions towards fundamental policy change. The constituent background of the House quite

naturally was narrower, and it was no secret that the House Agriculture Committee as a whole was more exclusively interested in farm income questions. Nonetheless, the numerical decline of rural House districts and the more conflictual and ad-hoc policymaking style made the House the nutrient medium for changing policymaking patterns and agricultural policy reform. In fact, the House was the leading force to expand the farm bill to urban and labor constituencies over the last decades. In 1990, the challenger groups were theoretically in a position to get relatively more legislators into an agricultural policy reform that would bind payments to social and environmental goals.

For the construction of a broad reform coalition, the main strategic difference from the Senate process was an increasingly serious threat of fiscal conservative and urban liberal legislators to amend the farm bill as to cut farm payments to "fat-cat farmers".⁵⁸ Named after its sponsors, the Arme y/Schumer amendment became the most significant reform force in the 1990 farm bill legislation. Because the committee position was substantially weakened by this threat (adding to the low rural

⁵⁸ One anonymous member of the environmental coalition ("Agenda Coalition, see below") commented on the basis of a draft version in August 1991, that my report on the House process overestimates the political impetus of the Arme y/Schumer threat. The floor compromise on the 1990 farm bill was to a considerable degree tailored under the auspices of the Speaker's office, with compromises on the allocation of cargo tonnage ("cargo preference") and textile quota being the core issues. Other interviewees agreed the role of the Speaker's office would have deserved more attention, holding nevertheless that the perception of the Arme y/Schumer amendment was as strong as presented in this study.

representation), potential policy reform efforts of the environmental, sustainable agriculture, and the family farm groups were more serious in the House. As a substantial overlap of interest existed between all potential policy challengers (farm payments to fat-cat farmers are expensive and unpopular in public, they induce intensive production systems, and they tend to accelerate the farm consolidation process), a coalition depended on the perception of all reform interests that the transaction costs of negotiating a fundamental policy reform and ensuring its compliance on the floor would be bearable.

The Agenda Coalition's double strategy: building political capital and signaling compromise

The Agenda Coalition's fortune in the House conservation arena seemed to have a hapless beginning. When the subcommittee staff worked out the vehicle for the markup of the Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit and Rural Development⁵⁹ in March and April 1990, the Agenda Coalition was simply ignored. The markup vehicle was similar to the Fowler/commodity groups' conservation bill, including the provisions undermining wetlands protection, watering down CRP eligibility and soil conservation standards, and providing just a voluntary, experimental well testing and record-keeping program.⁶⁰ However, the conservation course

⁵⁹ Further on referred to as 'conservation subcommittee'.

⁶⁰ EESI Weekly Bulletin (April 23).

changed dramatically in the Agenda Coalition's favor, as full committee chairman E (Kika) de la Garza (D-TX) introduced an independent conservation bill the day before the conservation subcommittee was to mark up the conservation title. Drafted more closely along the coalition's agenda lines, the de la Garza bill was an offer for "the environmentalists" to be part of the policymaking process. High level politics had driven the events, as de la Garza's conservation bill had been written in isolation from the subcommittee; its chairman Glenn English (D-OK) was caught by surprise.⁶¹ In fact, De la Garza had already decided in late 1989/early 1990 to prepare the strategic option of enlarging the farm bill constituency by "the environmentalists".

The Agenda Coalition had in many ways dictated de la Garza's move. Already during their formation process in late 1989/early 1990, the Agenda Coalition took some first steps to put pressure on the agricultural committee by threatening with political allies outside the conservation subcommittee. Among the names mentioned were powerful Representatives such as Silvio O. Conte (R-MA; ranking member of Appropriations, known also for his crusades against subsidies for big farmers), George Miller (D-CA; future chairman of Interior, pragmatic environmentalist, and known for his fights against irrigation subsidies to big producers), and John D. Dingell (D-MI; Chairman of Energy and

⁶¹ The main reason for English's misjudgment of the situation was the immense range of issues falling into the jurisdiction of the "Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit and Rural Development", as congressional staffer and lobbyists commonly expressed.

Commerce, pragmatic environmentalist, and known as "most effective House member"). The Agenda Coalition's strategy was two pronged, though. The demands developed during the coalition formation process left enough leeway for a compromise to go with the committee.

The Agenda Coalition's floor build-up and parallel courting with the agricultural committee was the first reason de la Garza considered a strategic alliance with the Agenda Coalition. More important, however, was the build-up of the so-called "Army/Schumer coalition" of fiscal conservatives and urban liberals that aimed at cutting payments to "fat-cat" farmers, or possibly even at dismantling the commodity programs completely. Public statements dated back into 1989, and concrete steps towards the "awkward", though powerful coalition were taken in January and February 1990.⁶² The House agriculture committee became increasingly aware of the potential threat.

With the potential of having the budget advocates and the urban Representatives and the environmental community form a coalition against the agriculture committee, they could have roped the farm bill down themselves.⁶³

What needed to be done was "to ensure that that coalition never

⁶² Arney was already threatening in January 1990 that he intended to organize all 'farm program opponents'; Food and Fiber Letter (Feb.5).

⁶³ Anonymous House agriculture committee staffer, October 1990.

got off ground." ⁶⁴

Several signs indicated that a strategic marriage of these forces was in fact possible. For instance Representative Charles Schumer (D-NY) stated publicly that he had support for his positions from the Natural Resources Defense Council. Lasting relationships between individual environmental groups and members of the House Interior and Insular Affairs committee (including George Miller and Sam Gejdenson, D-CT) and their close links to the urban liberal fraction (including Chuck Schumer and Silvio O. Conte, R-MA) in fact suggested that the environmental groups would support their "natural" allies in the House. The Agenda Coalition leadership avoided a public position, knowing that Natural Resources Defense Council's statement and the assumed environmental support advanced their floor and vote trading value.

When the farm bill opposition started to take shape in January and February 1990, the Agenda Coalition did not try to build a coalition with either the fiscal conservative or urban-liberal forces. In retrospect, this neglect had fundamental repercussions for a potential broader reform coalition: once the Arney/Schumer coalition was firmly established and widely known for their agenda, strategic realignments with the Agenda Coalition were difficult to achieve. As will be demonstrated below, this loss of strategic options came especially true for

⁶⁴ Anonymous House agriculture committee staffer, October 1990.

the urban-liberal camp lead by Schumer, that belonged to the traditional environmental strongholds in the House. So to speak, the transaction and opportunity costs for an explicit coalition between urban-liberal farm critiques and the Agenda Coalition increased with the public attention on the Armev/Schumer farm bill attack. (As will be demonstrated below, the Agenda Coalition increasingly bound itself to the agricultural committee, whereas Schumer's side were to lose political credibility if compromises were made that departed from the Armev/Schumer line. Most importantly, after both sides had made strategic investments into their respective alliances, each side was to suspect that any talks on an urban-environmental coalition lacked any sincerity.)

Nevertheless, from an observer's perspective, a coalition between the environmental/conservation groups and the emerging Armev/Schumer coalition seemed very possible in January and February 1990. Thus, de la Garza decided to keep strategic options with "the environmentalists" open by having his staff draft an independent conservation bill. When it became finally clear some time in mid-April that English was not in control of the situation, de la Garza's staffer contacted the Agenda Coalition formally, and asked for their conditions for a cooperation, to be incorporated in a conservation bill by the Chairman.

De la Garza's bill eventually provided the ground for the inclusion for parts of the Agenda Coalition's agenda into the farm bill, even though the way towards the aspired compromise was

rather uneven. As a first obstacle, the conservation subcommittee marked up English's bill on May 8, in spite of the de la Garza bill, and in spite of the more environmental tone set by the Senate Agriculture Committee in their final markup days on May 3/4. However, English distanced himself from what he called a "staff draft", thus postponing the political battles, and leaving bargaining space for the markups at the full committee level.

Full committee markups in the House had already started by May 5 before the conservation subcommittee hastily finished its mark-up. The committee schedule demanded that the whole farm bill be finished before Memorial Day on May 27, but the conservation title delayed this time frame a second time. As in the Senate, the willingness and seriousness to search for a compromise had to be proved by the opposing camps. It needed again the determined role of the committee leadership to let a compromise appear possible and enforceable.

The Agenda Coalition was willing to compromise with the House Agriculture Committee for all of the investments already made in their agenda setting phase and in the Senate. The veto opportunity of the traditional farm bill interests at the conference level demanded for a resolution of largely the same issues in the House that had been achieved before in the Senate. Winning those same issues on the floor would afford resources hardly available in a coalition that had at best 15 full-time staffers on the farm bill, of which only a minority belonged to, and was undisputedly willing at that point, to follow the

leadership. Not to the least, floor votes were expensive in terms of political credit, and most legislators would hardly support more than a few environmental issues. Any pre-floor deals were susceptible to last minute changes, especially when the agricultural committee was to mobilize its vote trading potential and its ability to create new program turf. With those institutional factors driving up the transaction costs for policy achievements and broader reform coalitions, all of the Agenda Coalition's strategic efforts were geared at increasing their floor potential, but keeping flexible enough for a settlement with the agricultural committee.

A reform coalition with the family farm and the sustainable agriculture groups was hardly of any serious consideration after the Senate decisions on conservation. With the perception of a farm crisis waning in the media, family farm and sustainable agriculture groups could not help to deliver many urban votes in the House, nor would they be able to split the agricultural committee and rural legislators along regional and commodity lines.

The most potent coalition of the Agenda Coalition was apparently with Army/Schumer. Reflecting the Agenda Coalition's double strategy to increase the floor pressure while signaling compromise, contacts with their staffers were at this stage merely scouting. The chances to get Arme y on the Agenda Coalition's side were perceived as rather low. Arme y's fiscal conservative agenda was geared at undermining the farm programs,

and only the narrow, simplistic agenda allowed for a superb media coverage. The Agenda Coalition contacts focused on Schumer's staff, as Schumer was assumed not to be directed at abolishing the farm programs indiscriminately of social and environmental impacts. The Agenda Coalition showed little interest in Schumer's genuine concern to cut farm payments, though.

With a clear vision of the strategic constraints, the Agenda Coalition was determined to gain on their investments for a further policymaking role. Thus, when de la Garza's staffer approached them in mid April, they willingly defined the terms of cooperation. The bottom line was again to resolve swampbuster, water quality and wetlands easements, and to get a committee pledge that other Agenda Coalition issues would be given a vote on the floor.

De la Garza was betting on a political settlement, especially as the Army/Schumer amendment threatened to gain additional momentum through the fiscal constraints facing the committee.⁶⁵ With unmistakable directions by de la Garza to get "the environmentalists" on board, the committee staff suggested direct negotiations between the commodity groups and the Agenda Coalition. As this was not acceptable to the commodity groups, the Agenda Coalition was invited for direct negotiations and some

⁶⁵ Parallel negotiations in the commodity section had lead to intense fights over loan rate and target price levels as ongoing budget negotiations between the administration and Congress promised deep cuts for the agricultural sector. The farm bill was way over budget as agreed upon in all titles except conservation in May 24, the last day in session before the Memorial Day recess; see also chapters 5 and 6.

drafting exercises with the committee staff, much to the dislike of the commodity groups. Two weeks after the Memorial Day Break, in June 13/14, a breakthrough was finally achieved, and letters from the commodity groups and the Agenda Coalition leadership pledged that the compromise would be sacrosanct on the floor. The range of the issues, and the substance were similar to the Senate settlement, covering swampbuster, water quality, and wetlands easements. With no Leahy pushing, the Agenda Coalition did not succeed in getting record keeping, circle, cosmetics, organics and soil conservation resolved in pre-floor negotiations and taken onto the committee bill. At least, de la Garza pledged to allow floor votes on the secondary coalition issues.

Coalition constraints in a policymaking network: The Agenda Coalition cohesion in further decline

The Agenda Coalition's bargaining process with the House agricultural committee and the commodity groups demonstrated that a broader reform coalition was rather difficult to uphold within the institutional framework of agricultural policymaking, as internal transaction costs increase with the number of participants and the heterogeneity of interests. The Agenda Coalition's cohesion was already strained even under the favorable conditions during the Senate negotiations. Apparently, having encountered a sympathetic Senate chairman in a generally hostile policy environment was exceptional. The House

negotiations revealed more of the structural weaknesses of the reform coalition. Whereas political bargaining with the committee and potential coalition forces favored a flexible mandate, the lack of established mechanisms of decision making and compliance demanded that all organizational positions were brought forward with equal weight.

The Agenda Coalition went into the negotiations with the House committee and the commodity groups with largely the same people. Mainly the Center for Resource Economics, and also the Audubon Society, Wildlife Federation and Sierra Club lead the negotiations. The agenda was largely the same as some weeks earlier in the Senate, and even though the Natural Resources Defense Council and the American Farmland Trust did not seem completely satisfied, they did not seriously try to change the overall course of events. The American Farmland Trust worked primarily on their farmland protection bill, and the Natural Resources Defense Council increasingly focused on cosmetics together with Public Voice, a prevalent consumer and food safety interest group in agricultural policymaking. Public Voice worked parallel on various other issues so that an additional ally was rather helpful. However, the links to the Agenda Coalition membergroups working on research issues, that is, the Consumer Federation of America (a consumer umbrella organization with interest group members), Institute for Alternative Agriculture (IAA), and Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS), declined, and the communication appeared to be limited eventually to

signing each other's congressional letters. Internal quarrels over political priorities had contributed to the corrosion of the coalition's cohesion, and as the political process went along, most membergroups got increasingly protective about their priorities.

Mutual non-interference was not only a consequence of internal quarrels and the fear that some issues could eventually be traded off by the Agenda Coalition leadership. Possibly more important, the staff resources were increasingly overworked. Most The coalition membergroups had only one or two permanent staffers working on the farm bill,⁶⁶ and most of them were well employed with their specific policy "niches". An active role in the policymaking network demanded time consuming technical inputs and communication work, especially in the House with its more fragmented and contentious policymaking style. The coalition internal exchange of information and the technical coordination became increasingly difficult; there were insufficient resources to continue the originally consensus-based decision making process.

Fundamental policy reform under different institutional conditions?

On June 14, the day following the committee settlement on

⁶⁶ For instance, the Audubon Society had two staff members working on the farm bill; Farmland Trust: 2; Center for Resource Economics: 4; Sierra Club: 1; NRDC: 2.

conservation, the agricultural committee had to take a horrendous defeat on the House floor, that had deep repercussions on the future bargaining process, and demonstrated that a different institutional setting might in fact allow for a fundamental policy change.

The issue was on federal (double) subsidies for large farm operations in the West. Those operations receive first federal irrigation water to produce surplus crops, for which commodity payments then have to come up in large parts. Two Representatives used an authorization bill for Bureau of Reclamation water and power projects for amendments that would cut deeply into what Representative Sam Gejdenson (D-CT, member of the Interior Committee) called an "unjust, unsound and outrageous practice by a select group of Western farmers."⁶⁷ His amendment was to phase out irrigation payments for surplus crops within four years. A parallel George Miller (D-CA) amendment would ensure that farms larger than 960 acres did not receive irrigation payments as the existing law clearly stated, but which was circumvented with ease. According to the sponsor, the amendment would end "abuses" that have allowed a few farmers "to enjoy the multimillion-dollar water subsidies intended only for family farmers."⁶⁸ Both amendments were adopted by enormous margins (338-55; 316-97). As one environmental observer described it, de la Garza "absolutely

⁶⁷ Gejdenson, quoted in Wisenberg 1990: 1876.

⁶⁸ Miller, quoted in Wisenberg 1990: 1876.

fell apart" on the floor.⁶⁹

These votes had historic character, as the "iron rule" of inter-commodity and democratic urban-rural accommodation had been challenged. Reclamation was simultaneously an environmental issue because of irrigation related salinity, aquifer depletion, and long-term wildlife implications. Thus, the vote could have had some demonstration effect for a farm bill reform coalition between budget conscious, family farm, and environmental interests. However, such inferences were hardly possible, as the institutional setting of the farm bill differed in crucial aspects. Most importantly, the reclamation bill had less political "pork" to distribute as compared to the farm bill, and only a few commodity and regional interests were at stake. The farm bill was broader and could easily be loaded with additional benefits for traditional or new constituents.

Nevertheless, the defeat on reclamation did lower the transaction costs for a potential coalition of farm bill challengers, as the perception of the committee's vulnerability could conceivably attract more disenfranchised interests and could lower the temptation to compromise. The accommodational strategies of the environmental, the sustainable agriculture, the family farm groups, and to some degree even the Arney/Schumer coalition,⁷⁰ was a consequence of the shared belief that a

⁶⁹ Anonymous environmental lobbyist, November 1990.

⁷⁰ The Arney/Schumer proposal was but a suggestion of the Office of Management and Budget; see also chapter 6.

defeat of the committee was impossible in the first place. As a result, all groups competed in a zero-sum-game framed by the traditional farm bill interests. The lack of compliance mechanisms to get farm bill challengers to stick to a more comprehensive reform agenda could theoretically be overcome by the shared belief that a coalition was to succeed with a reasonable probability.

The institutional protection of the status quo: Floor "deals" on conservation

The committee's outright defeat on the reclamation vote, and the growing immediacy of the "Army/Schumer monster"⁷¹ opened new bargaining space. Kika de la Garza did not want the environmentalists go together with the fiscal conservatives and urban liberals, and so he started to make blatant offers to the Agenda Coalition.

The pre-floor negotiation process in the House offered a last opportunity for a fundamental reform coalition. The Agenda Coalition had the choice to work towards a coalition with either the family farm groups, the sustainable agriculture groups, or with the Army/Schumer supporters (or any combination of them). The potential, common denominator of all groups was a targeting scheme that would be cheaper and that would take away much of the

⁷¹ Committee perception as paraphrased by Kathrin Hohman (Sierra Club).

immediate rewards of intensive production schemes on larger landholdings without also removing all incentives to comply with environmental regulations. However, as the parallel negotiations in the commodity section uncovered, targeting was used as a bargaining chip by the family farm groups. Only the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was betting hard on a targeting scheme and pushed especially Schumer for an adjustment of his amendment. For the Agenda Coalition, though, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's legislative constituency alone was far too weak to promise a substantial contribution to pursue a floor vote on targeting against the committee.

In contrast, an Agenda Coalition alliance with the urban liberal faction of the Arney/Schumer coalition seemed possible. Both groups could potentially "dig deep" into the democratic constituency that was needed for a farm bill majority. Contacts between the Agenda Coalition and Schumer's staff did in fact intensify during June and early July, however without agreements. At this stage, Schumer could hardly escape his commitment to Arney due to the media coverage on the issue. As important, Schumer's staff felt uneasy with the Agenda Coalition's strategic considerations. The Agenda Coalition had not approached them seriously at an earlier stage in the farm bill process for a common reform agenda. The Agenda Coalition's concern now was that Arney/Schumer compromise with the agricultural committee,⁷² or

⁷² Two anonymous representatives from the Agenda Coalition commented in retrospect (comments on the basis of a distributed draft of my study of August 1991), that Schumer's staff members

that Armev/Schumer modify their amendment to leave large operators with incentives for environmental compliance. Both variants would allow the Agenda Coalition to not take a position during floor debates, thus being unconstrained in all political negotiations. The second, payment reduction variant, would also allow Armev/Schumer and the Agenda Coalition to coalesce and to bet on political concessions from the agricultural committee.

Schumer's staff did not share the Agenda Coalition's compromising attitude. From a technical point of view, farm payment cuts to big producers were in the environmental interest; wetlands and soil conservation provisions could be enforced by alternative means. Besides questions of political ethics, Schumer's staff believed that a victory against the committee was possible. It was questionable whether the Agenda Coalition would put all their weight behind a revised amendment.

The judgement concerning the Agenda Coalition's political unreliability in a coalition against the agricultural committee was plausible. By pretending that options were open, the Agenda Coalition increased their political capital and the pressure on the committee. However, with the committee powers to determine the floor debate and to package the bill, a coalition with Armev/Schumer was risky, and later veto opportunities might decimate any achievements. But also, in conceptual terms, a

were rather naive in their judgement to be able to "beat" the agricultural committee on the floor. One comment points out that Schumer's staffer (mistakenly) took the environmental support for granted; the Agenda Coalition made no formal commitment at any point during the farm bill process.

coalition with budget conscious legislators would complicate the environmental argument towards legislators and the media, and would inescapably lead them into discussions of commodity program reforms. With the key issues on wetlands conservation and water protection already resolved, a further bet on a committee settlement seemed preferable.

Against strong committee internal discontentment, de la Garza sent his staff into a second bargaining round in early July in order to pledge the Agenda Coalition's floor support. As a broad range of issues seemed to open up (including a substantially stronger recordkeeping provision), representatives of most Agenda Coalition membergroups, as well as other environmental groups, labor and farm worker unions, and church groups participated in the negotiations. The strategy for getting items onto the negotiation agenda was simple, although it brought the Agenda Coalition at the edge in terms of staff resources. Membergroup staffers were building up floor threats through letters, calls and discussions with congressional staffers and Representatives and presented the accounts of the prospective floor votes to the committee. Indicated the vote count that an environmental majority was possible on an individual issue, then the item was usually up for a pre-floor agreement with the agricultural committee.

In this way, most of the issues blocked in committee were gradually resolved. Pesticide recordkeeping was an especially sensitive issue for the agricultural committee after the

reclamation vote, as one of its key sponsors, George Miller, had introduced a bill that would require pesticide recordkeeping for all pesticides, and would guaranty free access to the data.

However, the agriculture committee did not run any risk. De la Garza asked the Agenda Coalition friend and member of the agricultural committee Jim Jontz (D-IN) to take things into his hands. Jontz introduced an amendment similar to Miller's, and a compromise was reached that left the coverage of the recordkeeping provision, but cut down on data access.⁷³

Tentative compromises were also achieved on cosmetics, circle, and conservation compliance. Notably, the conservation compliance provision was considerably stronger than what had been agreed in the Senate during the committee negotiation process.⁷⁴ The only Agenda Coalition issue not resolved was organics, as the committee bluntly refused the staff-negotiated compromise version days before the vote.

All of the compromises reached in the pre-floor negotiations were only of a tentative nature, as they were linked to the Agenda Coalition's standing on the floor. The closer the vote came, the more explicit were those conditions made. Apparently,

⁷³ The applicator's name, the address and the specific location of the application would not be disclosed to the general public, although the aggregate data would be available at county level. Free access would be guaranteed to health professionals, farm workers, researchers and regulators.

⁷⁴ Proving the vulnerability of the agricultural committee in the House on regulatory issues, the environmental and conservation groups had "beaten" the committee during the 1985 farm bill floor fights with a strict conservation compliance provision.

the coalition had to withdraw from any environmental critique, but allow for political position taking for an environmentally progressive farm bill. More than this, however, the agricultural committee started to put pressure on the Agenda Coalition to take a stance on the Arney/Schumer vote.

Taking a position on Arney/Schumer was a sensitive issue for the Agenda Coalition leadership, as the coalition had been painfully avoiding the social agenda. In fact, avoiding the social agenda, and related to that, avoiding the question of commodity program reform had been the basic rationale to split off the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition from their own group. The closer it came to the floor vote, the more desperately the Agenda Coalition leadership tried to have Schumer change his position. The Agenda Coalition argued that the committee leadership could not force them to take a position against the Arney/Schumer amendment if it were slightly adjusted to give operators enough incentives for environmental compliance. The Agenda Coalition steered towards a committee "deal" at lower political costs.

Such a request was not acceptable to Schumer and his staff. The Agenda Coalition's prospective support for the committee was to add votes and legitimacy to the farm bill package, thus indirectly undermining the Arney/Schumer amendment. If the institutional constraints made compromises with the committee unavoidable for any short term policy gains, and all political players seemed to have bought into that logic, then all policy

challengers were once again in a zero-sum-game situation. A modification would take away much of the political explosive of the Armev/Schumer amendment, for which Schumer was publicly committed. Schumer's staff stuck to their proposal.

The Agenda Coalition was eventually forced to take position. Hours before the crucial floor decisions, the ultimatum was formulated by the agricultural committee: either take a floor position against Armev/Schumer, and implicitly against all targeting proposals, or all tentative pre-floor compromises were off. Thinking in terms of what could be gained and what could be lost, the Agenda Coalition leadership decided in favor of the committee. Even though payment cuts to large operations were in the environmental interest, the Agenda Coalition's support could not ensure their passage. In contrast, with the committee potential to compromise in other areas, or to create some new "turf", potentially reform minded legislators were most susceptible to last minute bargains. Considering also the veto opportunity at conference stage, little was to be gained by supporting the Armev/Schumer amendment. Opposition would possibly result in short-term loss of political credibility, but would ensure the passage of a conservation title. Thus, the Center for Resource Economics, Audubon Society and the Wildlife Federation wrote the inquired floor letters. The thrust was simple: any amendments that would push producers out of the commodity programs would harm the environmental cause, as swampbuster, sodbuster and conservation compliance violations were penalized

with program payment withdrawals.

With an increased constituency, and furnished with some of the required letters, the committee bill including the environmental provisions did well on the floor.⁷⁵ In exchange for defending the commodity programs, the committee forwarded the pre-floor compromises as safe en-bloc amendments.⁷⁶ Pesticide recordkeeping and circle were taken into the farm bill without any changes. Only cosmetics and conservation compliance suffered, as pre-printing requirements for committee external amendments in the Congressional Record were accidentally not fulfilled in time. As the Arney/Schumer vote was over at that time, the Agenda Coalition was in no position to enforce those "deals". However, "in the interest of having solid support for the Farm Bill",⁷⁷ the committee leadership forwarded also some of the original agreements as last minute, en-bloc amendments.

The Agenda Coalition's only floor fight was organics, as the agricultural committee had not even agreed to a last-minute compromise version that excluded meat and poultry. After extensive lobbying efforts, the organics provision (including meat and poultry) succeeded with 234 ayes and 187 nays. The

⁷⁵ The NRDC wrote a "pro" Arney/Schumer floor letter, the Sierra Club and the Farmland Trust took no position; for a discussion of the floor vote on commodity reform issues and the Arney/Schumer vote see also chapter 5.

⁷⁶ En-bloc amendments are not allowed to be amended on the floor. When furnished with bi-partisan support from a congressional committee, they usually pass without debate.

⁷⁷ Anonymous House Agriculture Committee staffer, October 1990.

result was rather surprising considering the small share of citizens and legislators concerned about the particular issue. As the only environmental vote, organics actually had become a "free environmental vote."⁷⁸

The last institutionalized stumbling block for the Agenda Coalition was the conference in October 1990. The temptation for both agricultural committees to apply their veto power was given, as the Administration threatened a veto for budgetary reasons. With Bush in a strong position, and with the end of the session and congressional elections just weeks ahead, the committee representatives were rather willing to reduce the costs of the bill; and that could be done in the conservation title at the Administration's blame.

Thanks to all committee leaders, and especially thanks to Leahy, most of the promises to the Agenda Coalition were kept in one or another way. The wetlands and water quality provisions were kept mostly untouched, as were cosmetics and organics. A major disappointment, though, was on recordkeeping and circle. Here some voices indicated second thoughts by the House committee that had worked towards a stronger recordkeeping provision, but towards a substantially weaker circle provision. Whatever was the case, the Senate delegation foreseeably insisted on the mini recordkeeping version. High level politics had driven the events, as the conference "recommendation" letter mentioned earlier

⁷⁸ Anonymous House Agriculture Committee staffer, October 1990.

circulated already one week after the floor vote, and the 53 signatures included most Midwest Senators and many traditional environmental strongholds. At the same time, the House envoy insisted on their rather meaningless circle provision, so that the original sponsor, Leahy, preferred to retreat completely.

Nevertheless, a core of the agreements held, and all of the committee leadership got "good grades" for their performance. As a congressional staffer expressed it: "Either you have made friends on the way to the conference, or you have not."⁷⁹ Apparently, the Agenda Coalition had.

4.6. "Niche" cultivation and policy entrepreneurship

The Agenda Coalition's strategies and role in the House were in many ways similar to the Senate. The Agenda Coalition had been seeking the role of a new farm bill constituent and achieved that in both chambers. Some of the differences of the processes were rather idiosyncratic in nature. Most importantly, Leahy was a rather atypical ally as chairman of the Senate Agriculture committee. Much of the fighting that was necessary in the House had been avoided in the Senate. Structural forces dominated nevertheless both processes, as Leahy was not a challenger of the traditional farm programs, but facilitated their extension by

⁷⁹ Anonymous House Agriculture Committee staffer, October 1990.

adding a new farm bill constituent. The more conflictual pattern in the House was apparently also a function of the more parochial committee structure in the House.

Unique features aside, the underlying structural forces that worked against fundamental policy change were apparently in the representational and institutional realm. When interest groups cultivate issue "niches" over many years, their interest in overall policy outcomes is secondary to the organizational priorities. This interest comes especially true for the environmental groups, that are rather loosely coupled to their constituencies. "Niche" issues aim conceptually at compatibility with existing programs. Compromises with the powerholders are predestined. In that sense, the Agenda Coalition's agenda was but a summation of individual priorities such as wetlands easements, water quality and farmland protection, resulting conceptually somewhat necessarily in a programmatic thrust towards inexpensive, problem and site specific, technically oriented solutions. "Niche" cultivation restricts the ability and inclination to be informed on the broader range of issues, thus discouraging coalition building and increasing the tendency to zero-sum game policymaking patterns that stabilize the status quo. "Niche" fragmentation, in turn, creates the need for policy entrepreneurs to bridge the differences among outsider groups, and between outsider groups and the established policymakers; policy accomodation results qua design.

The second force that worked against fundamental policy

change was within the institutional realm. As Schattschneider emphasized,⁸⁰ the organization of the political process constitutes a bias. Policymaking patterns frame the strategic accounts of the policy challengers and restrict their ability to induce fundamental policy change. The current agricultural policymaking pattern seem to increase the transaction costs for broader reform coalitions beyond their organizational capabilities. Disenfranchised groups of the traditional agricultural programs need to find their potentially overlapping interests without institutional forums. The exchange of information and the negotiations for reform agendas are resource consuming. Without mechanisms for compliance, potential coalition members might easily be "bought off" by new programs. Mutual distrust may prevail. Examples were the mutual suspicion with which the Agenda Coalition and the family farm groups met in late January, and with which the Agenda Coalition and the Schumer's staff went into negotiations in June and early July.

Disenfranchised groups need to find their potentially overlapping interests not only without institutional forums, but also without symbolic "clamps", such as the family farm myth that linked the traditional farm programs. Searching for interest overlaps in the realm of technical adjustments and incremental changes quite naturally does not promise results. Institutional constraints, and the lacking perception of common interests may result in a belief that the traditional farm programs are

⁸⁰ Schattschneider 1975.

insurmountable. Such a perception may easily become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Whereas the agricultural committee leadership in the House was aware of the vulnerability of the farm bill process, the Agenda Coalition never seemed to consider a coalition with other forces.⁸¹ Ironically, the urban liberal forces shared the Agenda Coalition's perception. Each side assumed that the other side did not believe in a victory. Each side held the courting of the other side as an attempt to increase their political market value for bettering the own terms in negotiations with the agricultural committee.

Combined, (over)adaption and (over)adjustment to these structural forces may easily result in missing policy windows and any potential for non-incremental policy change. Even though a defeat of the House agriculture committee would surely not have resulted in the control of the farm bill by urban, environmental and possibly sustainable agriculture interests, it would have nevertheless dramatically changed the perception of the vulnerability of the farm bill process, thus lowering the transaction costs for future coalitions for fundamental policy change in agriculture. In that sense, the Agenda Coalition fell victim to their own disassociation from the broader social agenda.

⁸¹ The reclamation votes were a notable exception, though outside the farm bill.

5. Sustainable agriculture groups's strategies

As the environmental groups had opted against a coalition with the sustainable agriculture and family farm groups in favor of a "deal" with the agricultural committee, the sustainable agriculture and family farm groups by and large pursued an accommodational agenda. The strategic decisions were apparently made simultaneously, with each groups' choice influencing the premises for the other groups. The environmental groups were not solely responsible for the competitive paths the different groups chose, even though their political strength and strategic position had made them the cornerstone for a reform coalition.

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's strategies in the conservation arena illustrated the structural weakness of a policy challenger in an established policymaking arena. Though starting out with a reform agenda for fundamental policy change, The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition cultivated an issue "niche" for sustainable agriculture and largely accommodated the traditional power holders with low-cost, add-on provisions that would nevertheless satisfy immediate constituent and organizational needs.

Strategic premises

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition had a tremendous task to forward their agenda, as most farm bill policies are biased

against sustainable agriculture.¹ As has already been mentioned, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's political resources were narrowly limited by their constituent background and their political effectiveness was questionable due to their decentralized coalition nature.

Besides these internal factors, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's strategic options were apparently shaped by their opportunities to build coalitions with environmental and family farm groups. As sustainable agriculture is a little known concept of urban constituencies and legislators, the environmental groups could, speaking in extremes, define sustainable agriculture as the solution to agriculture related pollution and resource depletion, or paint it as new program "turf" at the urban expense. As chapter 4 discussed, the dominant environmental representatives tended towards the second definition during the farm bill course. Similarly, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's suggestions for family farm oriented farm program reforms would only gain the necessary impetus if family farm groups would conceptually agree and attract the necessary media attention. However, overtime the family farm groups got increasingly protective about their core demands.

With environmental and family farm support lacking for

¹ The following account of SAC's activities concentrates on the most visible activities within the conservation and commodity arenas, thus excluding research, credit, crop insurance and others. The selected policy issues and arenas give nonetheless a representative picture of SAC's overall strategies and their performance as "agent for policy change."

fundamental reform demands and necessary floor support, The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's leverage for sustainable agriculture and specifically for recoupling issues was limited to potential sympathizers within the agricultural committees. Sustainable agriculture reform strategies, however, could appear to be antagonistic to normal agricultural policymaking which is geared towards committee internal compromises between the different commodity and regional farm program interests.

Sustainable agriculture related demands can threaten the delicate inter-commodity balance because of their different implications on cropping patterns and payment devices in different production zones. For instance, base flexibility among program crops might shift soybean acreage from the South, given the price structure. Especially when policy incentives were tailored towards moderate-sized farms, the Midwest benefitted from its more homogenous farm structure and traditionally diversified operations.

The Midwest legislators,² often Democrats, were a distinct minority in the committees which they shared with powerful Southern Democrats and relatively homogenous Republicans, both groups representing predominantly large scale and agribusiness oriented interests.³ It is doubtful that the prairie-state

² Some of these legislators are often referred to as prairie-state legislators or "prairie populists".

³ Specifically, the Southern cotton and rice interests are favorably treated through statutory minimum loan rates in spite of an established target price system. Statutory minimum loan rates reduce the level of deficiency payments subject to the

legislators would seriously challenge the committee's internal power structure for, say, a major recoupling vote at the risk of the remainder farm bill. The moderate scale and economically stressed farm constituency from the Midwest was crucially dependent on a farm bill, and a traditional farm bill was still better in the short run than no farm bill at all. The transaction costs to build up alternative majorities and secure reforms on the floor, conference and during implementation could be enormous.

If the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition could not find strong allies for either floor support or within the agricultural committees, they would be forced to find individual legislators willing to push for a, then necessarily narrow, non-challenging agenda that would not challenge any of the main interests. With expertise being their main political resource, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition could try (and did in fact try) to establish an issue "niche" for sustainable agriculture, thus contributing to the zero-sum-game situation of potential policy challengers and to the stability of the agricultural programs in place.

5.1. Political isolation and demand adjustment

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition had a leading hand in

\$50,000 payment limit.

the formulation of the environmental and conservation agenda in 1988 and early 1989. Even though the Fowler bills were not as radical as to question the rationale of the commodity programs, they nevertheless were a major step of environmental recoupling of federal payments.

With the environmental and conservation groups departing from the Fowler process and the exclusion of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition from the early formation efforts of the Environmental and Consumer Agenda - Coalition (Agenda Coalition), the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was in an uncomfortable strategic position. Stripped of their strongest allies, they had to remain with Fowler and the commodity groups. With Cook's (Center for Resource Economics) conceptual leadership role, they had little prospects of future cooperation with the emerging Agenda Coalition. Alternative political alliances within the agricultural committee did not exist. Crucial majority staffer agreed with Cook's argument that the sustainable agriculture proposals on commodity reforms were neither politically fashionable nor would they bring the most tangible environmental benefits. Strategically, the committee leadership found little interest in cooperating with the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, as their Midwest sympathizers were already on the side of the committee, and as sustainable agriculture advocates would not be able to deliver environmental or urban floor votes.

With access to the committee leadership monopolized, and with the environmental capital foreseeably pocketed by the Agenda

Coalition, and with the family farm groups not prepared to run into any risks, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition stuck with Fowler because of a commitment for Fowler's early support and his general sympathy with the sustainable agriculture demands. "(On commodity program reforms,⁴) Fowler was our best friend, and he was our only friend. Our only choice was to stick with Fowler and try to negotiate the best deal we could with the commodity groups."⁵

With the prospects waned for fundamental policy reforms, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition reevaluated their strategy towards the establishment of a sustainable agriculture issue "niche". As the first step, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition nailed most of their commodity program related demand structure down to the Integrated Farm Management Program Option (IFM), which was a voluntary program designed to allow resource conserving rotations while prolonging deficiency payments. Although not dramatic in scale because both the Fowler sustainable agriculture and the IFM provisions were moderate proposals anyway, the change represented a programmatic turn away from across-the-board land use changes and concentrated instead on the limited number of farmers committed to sustainable agriculture practices.

This new programmatic thrust is illustrated by a comparison

⁴ Political alliances differed between issue arenas. On research, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition worked closely with the Leahy's staff.

⁵ Hassebrook.

between the Fowler sustainable agriculture provisions of May 1989, and a Jim Jontz (D-IN) bill, which carried the IFM into the House subcommittee process in October 1989.⁶ As compared to the sustainable agriculture provisions in Fowler's 1989 conservation bill, the Jontz bill lacked the provisions on mandatory, though subsidized crop covers on set-aside acreages and for a voluntary multiyear set-aside program directed at soil and water protection and the establishment of wildlife habitats. Besides dropping some general demands, the infant IFM version of Fowler was made more attractive and more focused on the then more limited number of program participants. The IFM as of fall 1989 asked for (a) full base acreage and deficiency payment protection for approved crop rotations instead of just 40 percent protection for resource-conserving crops, (b) acreage adjustments that would waive set-aside requirements for approved crop rotations and conservation practices, (c) cost-sharing of short term stands of resource conserving crops instead of cost-sharing just on set-aside acres, and (d) waiving of cross compliance, that would allow adopting producers to plant commodity crops for which they have no base acreages without forfeiting payments on established bases.

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was not in a position to find allies for a fundamental policy reform, and therefore they were also willing to accommodate the traditional farm bill

⁶ Jim Jontz 1989. "Sustainable Agriculture Adjustment Act of 1989." Introduced in October 31, 1989. Jontz had actually insisted early on that SAC narrow down their bill to the Integrated Farm Management Program Option.

forces. The IFM as core sustainable agriculture demand in the conservation and commodity area had assumed an experimental status for a limited number of farmers who wanted to farm with sustainable methods without being penalized by the current system. Apparently, the IFM would nevertheless satisfy immediate membergroup needs. The local sustainable agriculture groups could have a leading role in providing the technical and administrative expertise to develop the conservation management plans.

When the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition went public with their agenda⁷ some 6 months later in a press conference, their structural weakness was reflected in their demand structure. The agenda statement of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition still demanded across the board reforms in the commodity,⁸ conservation, research and international trade section, but proposals also included focused, non-challenging proposals on the IFM and sustainable agriculture research and extension. The agenda statement implicitly addressed the state of potential coalitions with family farm and the environmental groups. Some attempts were made to build a bridge to the family farm groups'

⁷ SAC's agenda statement was formally forwarded by the Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, including the Sierra Club, the Izaak Walton League, the Rodale Institute and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference besides the SAC core of sustainable agriculture and rural advocacy groups.

⁸ The commodity section entailed detailed recoupling proposals to target farm payments through a two tier targeting system and to reform the base acreage and yield system, including demands for base flexibility, partial deficiency payment protection for resource conserving rotations (as suggested in the early Fowler bills), and changes in the target price structure.

bushel based supply control agenda, as the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition also suggested bushel or volume based supply control instead of acreage limitations. However, their recommended production limits rather than marketing certificates (which the NFFC promoted) as regulating device. The actual political demands ended with a Congress feasibility study of such a measure. The agenda statement did not concede to the political priorities of the leading environmental/conservation representatives. Most importantly, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition did not include regulatory devices on water quality or a pesticide record keeping provision. Instead, they promoted education and market based devices, including pesticide and fertilizer taxes, and they emphasized the value of sustainable agriculture, to be disseminated by the IFM, to meet water quality and soil erosion control goals.

Even more than the substantial demands, their presentation and the public reaction highlighted sustainable agriculture's outsider status. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition held their press conference in Minneapolis/St. Paul in February 8. In contrast to the much heeded press conferences of the Agenda Coalition and the Administration two days earlier, the presentation of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was virtually ignored.⁹ The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition could

⁹ For instance, the Des Moines Register and the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported about the Sustainable Agriculture Working Group's positions days after their news conference, but the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times did not.

apparently not compete with the two giants of the agricultural policymaking process. The Agenda Coalition's press conference had been perfectly timed, and with its implications of future farm bill fights between "the environmentalists" against "the farmers", there was little perceptual room left for "the environmental farmer." The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition had finally lost their environmental vote potential to the Agenda Coalition, so that future strategies could exclusively be built on legislators from their home states.

5.2. Preparing an issue "niche" in subcommittee

The actual course of the (politically adjusted) sustainable agriculture agenda took different routes in the Senate and in the House even though in both cases the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition focused their political energies at establishing an issue "niche" for sustainable agriculture at subcommittee level.

Fowler and the conservation subcommittee

Collaborating with Fowler in the Senate in fall 1989 was a sensitive strategy for the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, after the committee leadership and the Agenda Coalition exerted pressure on Fowler and the commodity groups. In November a representative of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

participated in one commodity groups/Fowler staff meeting on the Integrated Farm Management Program (IFM). The commodity groups agreed that they would tolerate the IFM, buying into the argument that the IFM was but a voluntary program option. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was not required to support the commodity groups' package as a whole: "And so it was never that we joined forces with the commodity groups, it was only that we agreed to negotiate with them. ... we never endorsed the package as a whole that came out of these negotiations.... We fought the commodity groups throughout the whole process."¹⁰ Some environmental lobbyists were rather critical about the role of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, "trotting after the commodity groups' coattails;"¹¹ they would have preferred a complete isolation of the Fowler/commodity groups process. However, with the meager press coverage of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, and for all of their organizational limitations, the coalition could hardly add political weight into the Fowler/commodity groups' process.

Nevertheless, Fowler's office made some requests to the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition for support of his and the commodity groups' conservation bill. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition resisted these requests. When a list of supporting groups for the soon-to-be-introduced conservation bill that

¹⁰ Hassebrook.

¹¹ ECAC member.

included their name was floated in late March 1990, the SAC expressed their qualified support in a press release. The message appeared in its title: "Sustainable Ag Coalition Applauds Conservation Farm Program". But the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition also stated, that the provisions on the protection of wetlands and highly erodible land represented "a major step backward in soil conservation efforts and the preservation of our nation's vanishing wetlands."¹² This position of qualified support seemed to satisfy Fowler's office.

In the upcoming (full) committee negotiations, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was apparently in a difficult position, as neither the commodity groups nor the Agenda Coalition were much in favor of the IFM and other sustainable agriculture elements on the Fowler/commodity groups' bill. With the media attention lost, sustainable agriculture had become a political football, only kept in the field by individual legislators' backing of a remnant agenda of non-threatening, inexpensive add-on provisions.

Establishing an issue "niche" for sustainable agriculture in the House

Representative Jim Jontz supported the issue list of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition within the receptive research subcommittee in the House. Jontz's "Sustainable Agriculture

¹² Sustainable Agriculture Coalition 1990.

Adjustment Act of 1989"¹³ had been largely drafted by coalition members, carrying the IFM as their new lobbying focus. Jontz believed that "there can be an alliance between environmentalists and family farmers",¹⁴ a statement which reflected much of his own rural Indiana, family farm debt crisis, and state soil erosion and groundwater problems. More important than his personal stance for the sustainable agriculture concept, however, was Jontz' legendary political effectiveness. Characterized as political "beatnik" and "rural troubleshooter",¹⁵ Jontz became famous during the course of the farm bill process for having placed amendments into all but two of the 17 sections of the farm bill.¹⁶

Jontz needed to be effective, as the "Sustainable Agriculture Adjustment Act" had a rather weak co-sponsorship. Neither the full committee, nor the conservation subcommittee chairman had signed on. Nevertheless, Jontz found a benign political environment in the research subcommittee,¹⁷ where

¹³ Jontz 1989.

¹⁴ Jontz, quoted in Cloud 1990 (June 2): 1724.

¹⁵ Cloud 1990 (June 2): 1724.

¹⁶ "So compulsive a legislator is Indiana Democrat Jim Jontz that the House Agriculture Committee staff has honored him with the first question of the 1990 Farm Bill Trivia Quiz. The question is: To which of the 17 sections of the massive farm bill did Jontz NOT attach an amendment? There is dispute about the answer. 'We are going back through the manuscripts to make sure,' said an aide;"; Cloud 1990 (June 2): 1724.

¹⁷ Jontz was member of the research subcommittee, but he had no seat within the conservation subcommittee.

structural opportunities (locus of agenda setting and technical expertise) coincided with personal factors. With Congressmen Jontz, Dan Glickman (D-KA), House Budget Chairman Leon E. Panetta (D-CA), and most importantly Chairman George Brown (D-CA), the research subcommittee entailed a progressive faction with considerable political weight. When Brown entered Congress nearly two decades ago, he represented a rural California district and found an assignment in the agricultural committee, but demographics and redistricting gave him an increasingly urban and environmental orientation. With his science background and well-known personal integrity, Brown had a rather uncontested authority on the highly technical issues of agricultural pollution. Brown's floor potential was too weighty for de la Garza to ignore, which gave Brown considerable leeway on subcommittee and full committee level.

The research subcommittee provided the ground to promote an issue "niche" for sustainable agriculture. Not to the least due to Jontz's initiative and Brown's backing, a joint hearing chaired by Brown was held in March 15 by the conservation and the research subcommittees. The hearing was on water quality issues and sustainable agriculture, allowing two sustainable agriculture representatives to testify in favor of commodity program and federal research reform.¹⁸

When the research subcommittee marked up in April, the IFM was not included. The proposal had deep ramifications with

¹⁸ Bay 1990; Goss 1990.

respect to the conservation arena, and internal tensions over sustainable agriculture issues did not allow an early settlement. Although all conservation related research questions were tabled, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition had found defendants for the political negotiations on conservation subcommittee and full committee level.

5.3. Influencing by expertise: committee openings

Sustainable agriculture was off as an agricultural reform concept months before the farm bill went into (full) committee consideration in May and June of 1990. Sympathetic environmental groups made up an indecisive minority and allowed the Agenda Coalition to monopolize the environmental vote potential, and the family farm groups and most Midwest legislators clung to the traditional supply control/loan rate approach. Consequently, during (full) committee deliberations, the main political resource of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was their technical expertise on sustainable agriculture.

Securing organizational priorities

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's first priority during full committee deliberations was to protect the IFM. Starting with the Senate, Fowler's staff made some efforts to

shield the IFM. With little backing from the prairie-state offices, the IFM suffered two decisive setbacks. The leadership stepped in for budgetary reasons. IFM's base acreage adjustment provision in favor of traditional rotation-practicing farms would lead to additional expenses. IFM participants could not be privileged. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's counter argument that those traditional land stewards save program monies as they do not cause overproduction of the particular program crops (besides preserving natural resources without pay) was not convincing, as those "savings" did not appear on any formal account. Base acreage adjustment was consequently cut.

In spite of the earlier pledge from the commodity groups to not fundamentally oppose the IFM, the second setback was set in motion by the National Cattlemen's Association. Dominated by its Western members, the National Cattlemen's Association charged that the IFM would subsidize forage crops and Midwest dairy farms, because legumes were among the crops that could be planted on paid program base acreages. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's argument that the savings would be made in the commodity programs as a whole was not persuasive, as this assertion highlighted the fact that certain commodities would indeed be better off. With the "iron law of inter-commodity accommodation" at stake, the Midwest Senators stepped back again, and the IFM program was reduced a second time. Forage crops would be allowed to be planted on base acreage, but payments would only be received if forage was harvested after the main growing season

or a small grain harvest. This result was a decisive setback, as the program structure would still discriminate against diversified farming with animal husbandry.

In the House, the IFM did somewhat better, as Jontz pushed the issues fiercely. Also other research subcommittee members, and eventually even the subcommittee chairman Glenn English (D-OK) were in favor of a more attractive IFM version. Base adjustment for traditional rotation-practicing farms was at least suggested as far as program savings would allow, and haying of conservation crops was allowed in addition to allowing grazing after the main growing season or small grain harvest.

Besides the backing from individual committee legislators, the survival of the IFM was also a function of the support from the family farm groups and individual environmental groups. Especially the NEFC endorsed the model character of the IFM, thus reconciling differences to their different, supply control/loan rate agenda. During final committee negotiations, the leadership of the Agenda Coalition did not take a direct stance on the IFM, what was politically equal to letting it fail. The Agenda Coalition had early on bought into the "zero-sum-game" logic, fearing that money and political capital spent on IFM would be lacking in other conservation sections. Still, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition had several allies within the environmental community and the Agenda Coalition, even though most of those had a rather difficult standing themselves. Only the Natural Resources Defense Council was backing the IFM without

reservations, but with no role at the bargaining table, this support did not help the immediate situation. The Sierra Club's and the American Farmland Trust's support seemed to be more important. The Sierra Clubs Agricultural Committee was strongly advocating the provision, even though the Washington office leaned towards the wetlands/water pollution stand.

Saving the IFM was not necessarily a consequence of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's political clout and their issue supporters within the environmental and family farm community. Drafting it as a no-cost/no-challenge program was only a necessary condition for success. To a considerable degree, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's persuasion work, and the strength of their argument, supported by parts of the scientific community, seemed to be crucial. Sustainable or alternative agriculture had recently gotten a large legitimacy boost by the National Research Council's "Alternative Agriculture". Why should public support programs discriminate against farmers willing to change towards environmentally sounder production methods?

Impacting core conservation issues

Besides securing the IFM, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's activities in the committee negotiations were also geared at influencing some core conservation issues. The efforts proved again their structural weakness. Even though the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was not an enthusiastic

supporter of regulatory approaches in general,¹⁹ they advocated a stricter conservation compliance regulation to achieve non-degradable soil loss levels (the so-called "T" level), as it was required in the 1985 conservation title.²⁰

Since internal committee approval of agricultural regulation was unrealistic, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition tried to encourage some of the environmental groups within the Agenda Coalition to advance the issue. During the negotiation process with the agricultural committees, this strategy had little success in either chamber. The traditional advocates of soil conservation, the American Farmland Trust and the Natural Resources Defense Council, had prioritized different issues and did not seem to have "free" lobbying capacities at this point. (Both groups were taking a stronger stance in pre-floor negotiations)

Commodity reform on conservation vehicle?

During the staff negotiations and the committee markup, the strategic limitations of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition became even more visible in their core agenda to recouple commodity payments to sustainable production practices. Base

¹⁹ SAC's reluctance to regulate found its clearest expression in their half-hearted groundwater and pesticide recordkeeping positions.

²⁰ Only the neglect of soil erosion allowed high input, monocultural cropping patterns in some regions of the country. Were soil loss standards stricter, alternative practices became more attractive, or even necessary.

flexibility was a salient issue, as also the Administration made it a core element of their agenda.²¹ The Administration promoted a Normal Crop Acreage (NCA) system, that would have allowed producers to plant any mixture of program crops and oilseeds on the NCA, which is the sum of program crop bases and historical oilseed acreage, while protecting current program bases and deficiency payments. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition opposed the Administration's flexibility proposal,²² as market prices alone would not necessarily reward landstewardship. Among the main shortcoming of the NCA system was its discrimination against conservation crops. Conservation crops could not be harvested if planted on the NCA, and if they were planted and harvested on set-asides, deficiency payments on the NCA would be deducted according to the number of conservation crop acres on set-asides.

Although the NCA proposal in its literal form was politically dead on arrival²³ due to the fierce resistance from the commodity groups' pinpointing at its decoupling character, the agricultural committees had to consider at least some planting flexibility along the Administration's lines. The group of upper Midwest Senators forwarded an NCA proposal²⁴ with some improved price and marketing devices for relatively extensive

²¹ United States Department of Agriculture 1990.

²² Center for Rural Affairs newsletter (May 1990).

²³ Senate Agriculture Committee staffer.

²⁴ Kerrey 1990.

program crops along sustainable agriculture suggestions.²⁵

Minimizing political resistance, though, non-program conservation crops were still excluded from the deal. The family farm groups took even a narrower stance, opposing not only the inclusion of traditional non-program crops, but insisting on the proliferation of commodity specific deficiency payments.

The Senate and the House agricultural committees proposed eventually an optional, mini-flexibility version on 25 percent of the program bases, however without payment protection. At least, this option was open for conservation crops in the Senate version, as individual Midwest Senators had supported the issue. To conclude, the leverage of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was minimal. Though ill-served with the current programs, the family farm groups feared that the institutional barriers to put farm payments on a new philosophical and political basis would be insurmountable.

Technical adjustments in commodity programs

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's lobbying efforts were more successful when it came to minor, technical adjustments of the commodity programs for conservation and sustainable agriculture. Some of those issues were in fact on the agenda of

²⁵ With that proposal the upper Midwest Senators were temporarily provoking some infighting within the commodity and production zones, though it might be suspected that the prairie-state NCA proposal also served to increase the leverage on price issues.

more powerful agents. For instance, set-aside regulation including the establishment of multi-year set-asides and mandatory (annual or perennial) crop cover possibly with federal cost-sharing were in one or another form included in the administration's proposal, Fowler's and Lugar's conservation bills of spring and summer 1989, and in English's markup proposal. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition supported all of those provisions, and tried to make sure that multiyear set-asides could be also rotated and used for forage legumes, an option which was included only in the Administration's proposal and in Fowler's 1989 conservation bill. SAC was successful when their proposals were cost neutral and when they found a strong individual champion. For instance, the multiyear set-aside option for rotations was adopted in the House as Jontz marketed it as "no-cost/somebody's benefit" provision. The limits were drawn (and the proposal was to fail) as soon as costs occurred or the rationale of the commodity programs was challenged, as in the case of base adjustments for long-term practitioners of resource conserving crop rotations.

Similarly (though on a different political level), the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition succeeded with a floor initiative, again proving that their technical expertise could advance issues at the fringes. Suggested by one farm member, and put into legislative language by the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, Representative Tim Penny (D-MN) forwarded the so-called "endrow-amendment" that allowed the most erosive field

endrows to be put into annual set-asides and possibly put under subsidized, permanent crop cover.²⁶ Considering the fact that the commodity programs had existed already for half a decade, this amendment was something of a small sensation, as the idea was so simple, but extremely effective and cost-neutral at the same time. As issue "niche" group, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was welcome to adjust and improve the current commodity programs as long as their essence was not touched.

5.4. Violating the "codes of conduct" on the floor

As the traditional farm program interests controlled the agricultural committee, the congressional floors were apparently the level on which fundamental policy reform had to be initiated, if it were to happen at all. After the adjustment of the political demands of the Agenda Coalition, of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, and of the family farm groups, none of these actors seemed to be prepared to take the lead. The traditional farm bill forces were under immense pressure from urban-liberal and fiscal conservative critiques of "fat cat farmer" payments, embodied most visibly as the Armey/Schumer coalition in the House. As the "potential" policy challengers could have found a common reform agenda in some form of recoupling and targeting, the farm payment reductions and

²⁶ Congressional Record 1990 (Aug.1): 6994.

targeting issue was the best opportunity for fundamental policy reform. The failure to form broad coalitions demonstrates that policymaking institutions raise the transaction costs for fundamental policy reform.

Senate targeting:

With a narrow rural background, the potential for fundamental policy reform was weaker in the Senate, even though the "fat cat farmer" payment critique was raised and could have served as an impetus for recoupling devices. Demonstrating the high institutional bias against policy reform, though, targeting was only a bargaining chip for the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's legislative allies from the Midwest. The democratic, "Prairie Populist" Senators within the agricultural committee threatened with floor votes for higher prices and targeting, if their economically deprived farm constituency was not appropriately served in the 1990 farm bill. This strategy seemed to pay temporarily, as the committee Democrats developed a schedule that would have particularly benefitted the Midwest without touching the privileges of the South.²⁷ The Midwest Democrats' strategy failed six weeks later in the end of June,

²⁷ The democratic committee plan as of Mid May included a target price increase with future inflation adjustment, a loan rate increase and the introduction of a marketing loan for wheat, feed grains, and soybeans. Wheat, feed grains, and soybeans are core Midwest commodities. So far, marketing loans had only been established for the Southern cotton and rice.

when Chairman Leahy and the senior Democrats accommodated the Republican side with a proposal that would freeze support prices and renounce new marketing loans in order to have a firm position on the floor and vis-a-vis the administration. The threat to put forth a targeting device had been doubted by other committee members. They knew, that the prairie-state Democrats would not be able to pull together an alternative farm program majority, but with the reelection being close, a "bad" farm bill was still better for them than "no" farm bill.

In fact, on the Senate floor, the (committee) Midwest legislators were among the main defenders of the committee bill. The first and most important commodity program attack came from the "fat cat farmer" critics. Senator Harry Reid's (D-NV) amendment would have barred "farmer fat cats"²⁸ with gross sales of more than \$500,000 a year from receiving commodity payments. The amendment failed decisively with a 30-66 vote. In spite of a reconcilable reform thrust, the Midwest legislators and the family farm groups clung to the current farm programs. They specifically opposed payment cuts as the loss of program participants (big farmers) would have lowered the short term leverage for supply control. Attacks on individual commodities (sugar, peanuts) failed except for honey, again with the prairie-state Democrats lending their support to the other commodity programs.

²⁸ Reid, quoted in Congressional Quarterly Weekly 1990 (July 21): 2305.

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, in contrast, promoted targeting and attempted to funnel the "fat cat farmer" critique into a momentum for targeting devices. Being aware of the committee pressure, Senator Thomas A. Daschle (D-SD, member of the agricultural committee) proposed a moderate two-tier targeting system. The committee leadership, though, mobilized against all efforts to change the bargained package. In spite of personal sympathies for targeting, Lugar bluntly attacked the Daschle amendment saying that higher target prices would not increase farm incomes.²⁹ Leahy pointly provided the reason to oppose a two-tier targeting system:

We have, in effect, created a Rubik's Cube where budget restraints and the sense of responsibility are interrelated with each commodity. This amendment would begin to change the face of that Rubik's Cube and would disrupt the delicate coalition we have put together.³⁰

With no other Senator speaking in favor of the Daschle amendment, and several prairie-state Democrats in opposition, the vote was lost decisively with 24-72. The "iron law of inter-commodity accommodation" had prevailed one more time, as the transaction costs for an alternative farm bill majority that would have been targeted at moderate-sized family farms were

²⁹ Congressional Record 1990 (July 24): S 10417.

³⁰ Leahy, quoted in Congressional Record 1990 (July 24): S 10418.

perceived as insurmountable.

House targeting

In the Senate, Daschle's two tier targeting system and the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's promotion of the issue were not considered "anti-committee". The amendment was moderate, Daschle's language carefully selected, and the impetus for payment cuts was weak. The situation in the House was different. With the increasing prominence of the Arney/Schumer amendment, any rural initiatives to combine the payment cut with the targeting agenda were as sensitively watched by the committee as any signs for a potential environmental alliance with Arney/Schumer.

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's targeting efforts in the House focused initially at the "House Subcommittee on Wheat, Soybeans and Feed Grains" (for convenience referred to as wheat/feed grains subcommittee) and its almost exclusive Midwest base. During their mark-up sessions in March and April, the wheat/feed grains subcommittee adopted a two tier targeting system somewhat accidentally, combining an early Jim Jontz amendment for target price increases tied to a consumer price index with a subsequent Timothy Penny amendment, that reacted on the fiscal constraints by limiting the target price increases to

certain amounts of the production.³¹

Together with a new soybean marketing loan device, the proposal was way over budget. Under increasing budgetary pressure, and with the Armey/Schumer floor amendment gaining impetus, the "iron rule of inter-commodity accommodation" demanded its tribute during the full committee markups. Chairman de la Garza created a task force in mid-May that agreed on the freeze of target prices and a modest soybean marketing loan. With a target price freeze, the Jontz/Penny targeting device failed. This result was exactly what Southern and Western forces at full committee level had insisted: "This (a targeting proposal) is the end of the programs as we know them."³² In contrast to the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, Midwest Representatives did not perceive of any alternative to pass a farm bill other than with the united committee.

Pre-floor attempts to reconcile payment cuts with targeting

Even though targeting sympathizers within the agricultural committee had evaporated, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition played against the issue "niche code of conduct" and tried, as in the Senate, to channel the Armey/Schumer impetus into a targeting device. Similar to strategy of the Agenda Coalition, the

³¹ For wheat: 27,500 bushels; for feed grains: 40,000 bushels.

³² Jerry Huckaby (D-LA), quoted in Cloud 1990 (June 2): 1723.

Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and their ally Bread for the World tried to make the sponsors reconcile their amendment with their own reform interests. For instance, a gradual phasing down of direct farm payments with increased adjusted gross incomes (rather than barring from any direct payments at the \$ 100,000 line) would cut all direct farm payments³³ effectively, thus performing simultaneously as targeting device while leaving big producers enough incentives to stay in the program and comply with supply management and environmental goals.

Bread for the World representatives met with Schumer's staff various times as Schumer's liberal-urban background suggested some receptiveness for the church group's rural advocacy. Schumer's staff, however, insisted that they earlier pledged their support for Arney. Observers from the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition found that Schumer had not foreseen the press dynamics Arney was able to create.

He (Schumer) was unskillful, because he let the conservative Republicans run away with it (the Arney/Schumer amendment), and they basically put it together as a public relations media event.³⁴

³³ Existing income screen, that is means tests regulations such as the \$50,000 payment limitation did not include government loans and crop purchases, gains realized from repayment of a marketing loans (for cotton and rice) at a price below the original level, and others (Kennedy/Visser 1990). Furthermore, these limitations have been evaded through multiple ownership of a farm.

³⁴ Hoefner.

Schumer would lose credibility if he were to change his position at this point.³⁵ Schumer apparently did not aim at, or believe in a fundamental policy reform from outside the agricultural committee. The transaction costs of getting reform minded interests together, negotiating a reform agenda, and making certain that nobody would fall victim to the courting of the Agriculture Committee were insurmountable. As a New York city delegate, it would be impossible to sell a committee external farm bill as a "family farm" bill; those rural groups with broader reform interest were not in a position to monopolize the agricultural myth either.

Floor resources of the traditional farm bill forces, and the rules of conduct for "peripheral policy challengers"

On the House floor, the Armev/Schumer amendment failed, as did all other major committee external attacks on the commodity programs, proving the institutional resources of the traditional farm bill interests one more time. Rural opposition was predictably united, and the "iron law of intercommodity accommodation" proved for the Armev/Schumer vote as well as for

³⁵ A contrasting interpretation emphasized that Schumer along with Armev liked the symbolic function of the amendment. Simplistic and radical as the amendment was, it exposed the farm program inequities effectively and forced the Agriculture Committee publicly to take rather uncomfortable positions.

individual commodities.³⁶ In addition to the accommodation of the Agenda Coalition, further urban support was traded against traditional farm bill provisions such as food stamps, food aid and cargo preference (within the farm bill) and against a rural pledge to support the textile import quota system. Both provisions were heavily supported by American Federation of Labor/Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL/CIO).

Besides the creation of new "program turf" and vote trading "deals", the Army/Schumer position had also suffered from the fact that it could be portrayed by the agricultural committee as a radical right wing and new York liberal conspiracy "against the heartland of America". Especially Arney's campaign discovery of "Moscow at the Mississippi",³⁷ comparing Roosevelt's agricultural policies with Stalin's economic rule did not help to win widespread Congressional support.

In contrast, policy statements from within the agricultural community could undermine the legitimacy of the farm programs. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition opposed the Arney/Schumer

³⁶ The first, and symbolic attack that tested the strength of the committee package was on the sugar program, increasing consumer prices, damaging sugar exporting countries, and undermining the U.S. GATT positions. In spite of the Administration's support, an amendment by Thomas J. Downey (D-NY) to cut the price support level failed, with support especially from the Midwest for their beetsugar and corn interests (corn sweeteners are sugar substitutes). Other floor assaults on honey, wool and mohair, other commodities and on general farm payment limitations were mostly defeated or adapted in substantially weaker versions, often forwarded by the committee to buy off resistance.

³⁷ Arney, Dick 1990. "Moscow on the Mississippi. America's Soviet style farm policy." Policy Review ? (51): 24-29.

amendment. However, much to the disgrace of the agricultural committee, they ongoingly tried to funnel the fat cat farm payment critique into an impetus for targeting. Their floor recommendation letter stated:

We applaud its (the Arney/Schumer amendment's) basic intent, but do not support the proposal as it stands. We do endorse phasing out full target price protection for farmers with large non-farm or total incomes, but not forcing farms out of the program entirely. Price support loans and low, secondary target prices should continue. In amended in such a manner, we would strongly endorse the proposal...

Comprehensive and carefully-crafted targeting amendments would ... greatly reduce the negative impacts of the current programs - encouragement of farm consolidation, weakening family farm agriculture, stimulation of overproduction and overspecialization, and regressivity. Yet they would not destroy, and in fact would enhance, the potentially positive aspects of those programs, including supply and price stabilization, conservation, environmental protection and basic income support.³⁸

Predictably, targeting failed on the House floor, as the committee deals concerning the payment cut votes covered all farm program amendments. The agricultural committee, including the Midwest delegation, labeled targeting as "farm program attack",

³⁸ Sustainable Agriculture Coalition 1990b.

making farm programs "inoperable". The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition strongly supported a Conte (Silvio O. Conte, R-MA) amendment, proposing a stricter person definition for the \$50,000 payment limitation; and a Dorgan (Bryan L. Dorgan, D-ND) amendment, suggesting a two-tier price support system similar to the one drafted in the wheat/feed grains subcommittee. The Conte amendment vote lost 171-286,³⁹ and the Dorgan amendment did not even come to a vote. Conte lost decisively on the democratic side (90-195),⁴⁰ as most Midwest Democrats were, at that point, quite nervous about any farm bill challenge. At the same time, urban and liberal Democrats had too much of an immediate interest in the proliferation of the farm bill vehicle for their own programs. Individual members did not believe in the committee's claim that the suggested commodity program changes would question the survival of the farm bill and considered the targeting question as rather narrow, separable issue. Nevertheless, many tended to follow the NFU recommendation,⁴¹ especially when additionally backed by the American Federation of Labor/Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL/CIO). The targeting amendments also suffered from the fact that the membergroups of the Agenda Coalition that had opposed the Arney/Schumer amendment did not clarify their position on targeting; for the (misleading)

³⁹ Congressional Quarterly Weekly 1990 (August 4): 2556-7.

⁴⁰ Congressional Quarterly Weekly 1990 (August 4): 2556-7.

⁴¹ Formally, the NFFC took no position on Conte, but in the given context 'neutrality' undermined also the voting strength.

similarities of the Arney/Schumer with the targeting amendments,⁴² all payment reduction amendments could be labeled "anti-environmental" by the committee.

Conference

Not taking a position along the committee lines against the Arney/Schumer amendment demanded a considerable price on conference level. In contrast to the Agenda Coalition, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition had not "made friends" with the House Agriculture Committee. The administration insisted on dramatic budget cuts, and the way IFM was analyzed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) it would be expensive. Thus, the temptation was high to cut the IFM, especially as the National Cattlemen's Association applied political pressure. The House delegation was reluctant to protect the IFM. Somewhat ironically, the Senate Committee staff, which had all along been rather cool towards the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition on questions of commodity program reform, kept the IFM from completely disappearing. The cuts finally made were on the usage of set-asides. Instead of allowing any resource conservation crop to be

⁴² Whereas the Arney/Schumer amendment barred large producers from any farm program payments and left indeed no incentives for environmental compliance, the targeting amendments left all producers with some incentives to comply with environmental regulation. Thus, the short-term environmental trade-offs of the Arney/Schumer amendment did not come true for the targeting devices. Agricultural laypersons (that is, the majority of the Representatives), however, could hardly be expected to recognize this difference.

planted and harvested, or grazed or hayed all season long, the final IFM version would not allow resource conservation crops that were also program crops (oats, barley, and rye) to be planted and harvested on set-asides. Furthermore, only half of the set-aside could be grazed and hayed all season long.

5.5. A "niche" for sustainable agriculture

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition did not have the capability to influence fundamental policy change. With a numerically and regionally limited membership basis, grassroots lobbying efforts were hardly penetrating. A few letter writing and telephone campaigns, and several fly-ins targeted at Midwest offices had little repercussions for committee level debates. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was a peripheral policy challenger. Potential allies in and outside Congress were anxiously protecting short term organizational and constituent interests, all of them adding to the overall stability of the disliked program status quo. The environmental community formed around a tangible, symptom level approach (equally cultivating issue "niches"), and both the family farm groups and the potential (mostly Midwest) allies in Congress preferred little satisfactory, but safe inter-commodity deals over risky coalitions. With the creation of new program turf inside the farm bill, and stable log-rolling arrangements, the farm bill had

become also an indispensable vehicle for many urban and liberal interests. Fundamental policy reform, possibly along the lines of sustainable agriculture, is associated with high transaction costs, exposing each potential policy challenger to efforts and risks beyond their organizational and role-specific rationality.

As the other policy challengers, including the Agenda Coalition and family farm groups, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition yielded to the political and institutional opportunities. In the role of a peripheral policy challenger, they established an issue "niche" for sustainable agriculture, reducing their across-the-board reform agenda to non-challenging, add-on provisions targeted to their specific constituent and organizational needs. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition employed sympathetic legislators at the subcommittee level to push for an experimental program for sustainable agriculture and worked towards some technical refinements of the farm programs commodity programs. As an issue "niche" player, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition relied heavily on diligence and technical expertise, providing well-grounded arguments, scientific backing and legislative language, and the political skills to move sympathetic interest groups and legislators in the policy network. Violating the codes of conduct on the targeting issue cost some of the most crucial achievements in the commodity section, demonstrating the inherent tension between the social movement and grassroots character of the membergroups, and the imperatives for effective policymaking "inside the beltway."

Sustainable agriculture achievements

The outcome of the commodity and conservation related side of the 1990 farm bill was nevertheless encouraging for sustainable agriculture and their protagonists at the local level.⁴³ Most importantly, the IFM, but also some other provisions such as the 25% base flexibility option and others⁴⁴ would reduce, and often eliminate the commodity program penalties for conversion to sustainable agriculture farming systems of individual farmers. Long time land stewards would continue to be penalized, as their low base acreage due to earlier shifts towards crop rotations would not be adjusted.

Increased flexibility would allow the grassroots groups to promote sustainable agriculture as economically viable option, thus strengthening the movement and spreading sustainable agriculture practices. For the USDA's and the extension service's traditional reluctance to promote alternative farming practices, the local sustainable agriculture groups would have to provide technical assistance to educate on the new flexibility options and to work out farm specific management plans. Again, with the

⁴³ Center for Rural Affairs 1991: "The 1990 Farm Bill: Its meaning for sustainable agriculture and future directions of the sustainable agriculture movement." Walthill, Nebraska.

⁴⁴ Other program elements increased the relative program flexibility as side effects, as they were set up for different purposes. Among them were the triple base rule, the discretion of the Secretary to adjust crop bases in order to meet conservation compliance standards and to serve other environmental objectives, and the "0-92" option that allowed farmers to receive 92% of the deficiency payments if grain base acreages were left unplanted.

expected reluctance of the agricultural establishment to effectively implement the sustainable agriculture provisions, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition will somewhat foreseeably "sustain" as a lobbying arrangement and issue "niche" player beyond the immediate 1990 farm bill.

6. The family farm groups' strategies

With the strategies and roles displayed of two of the three potential members of a fundamental reform coalition, the presentation on the third actor hardly offers many surprises on the overall farm bill course. As previous references have indicated, the family farm groups also opted for an accommodational farm bill course.

Strategic premises

To recall, many the organizational premises of the family farm groups and the unfavorable political climate had left the family farm groups without common demands in the crucial commodity area. Mandatory supply management was politically unfashionable; not even Harkin, who had spearheaded the Congressional initiatives in 1985 and 1987 was willing to sponsor a new version of the Farm Policy Reform Bill. With much of their constituency economically stressed, income enhancement was a primary goal, but supply control within the current program structure accelerated farm consolidation. "Recoupling" was often castigated as "decoupling" and "welfare" and thus politically risky. Apparently, the family farm groups were in a dilemma.

6.1. Sustainable agriculture as reform strategy?

Coalescing with the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was hardly a strategically viable option. The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition was even more of an outsider, and legislators sympathetic to sustainable agriculture (mostly from the Midwest) were traditionally among the core supporters of the family farm groups. Family farm representatives felt that only a minority of their members were committed to sustainable agriculture practices anyway, but those who wanted to make the shift should have the option. However, family farm groups differed on the approach of how to make that option economically viable and politically acceptable to both their member constituency and policymakers in the capital. Much of the difference was a question of perception: family farm groups maintained that their constituents insisted on "fair market returns", thus promoting supply management and marketing certificates. (De- or recoupling implied governmental paychecks). If the political situation allowed only for changes within the current system, risk management programs for large scale shifts towards sustainable practices would require higher loan rates or, if targeted to those farmers willing to make the transition, would require premium loan rates or deficiency payments and premium insurance tariffs.

Following that emphasis, NFFC and NFU lent their names to early proposals of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition¹ as long as immediate trade-offs with other larger income questions were avoided. The early Fowler bills were somewhat attractive to the

¹ For instance, Cook 1990.

family farm groups for their mainly educational and incentive based conservation thrust; base flexibility within the sustainable agriculture section seemed acceptable during the agenda setting phase. The NFFC and the NFU were strongly in support of the Jontz bill, as the proposal went into subcommittees. As both proposals were initiatives of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the family farm groups did not insist on special economic risk management schemes.

The family farm groups were further helpful to further sustainable agriculture in (full) committee when policy initiatives were formulated in a complementary way to the program core. Specifically, the family farm groups supported the IFM, new eligibility rules for the Conservation Reserve Program, and several set-aside provisions. However, as a NFU representative emphasized in a congressional hearing, their delegates had only accepted a 25 percent flexibility scheme, as regional issues were at stake.² For much the same reasons, price adjustments in favor of resource conservation crops could not be supported (as main crops were to suffer otherwise). Targeting was supported in the modest form of the Penny/Jontz device and within their own, bushel based supply management schemes. On the Congressional floors, the family farm groups frustrated all major targeting attempts as they demanded governmental, instead of so-perceived market-based income transfers, shying away from both group internal and political conflicts.

² Swenson 1990.

Strategic relations to the Agenda Coalition

As has also been indicated, a meeting with the (Environmental and Consumer) Agenda - Coalition in late January had not led towards the coordination of policy demands nor fundamental policy reform. The NFU and NFFC representatives seemed somewhat surprised about the suspicious atmosphere, as their decisions to meet with Fowler's staff just one week earlier had been exploratory, and based on cooperations in other legislative areas such as farmers minority questions. The Agenda Coalition was just about getting their agenda statement ready, and their representatives seemed not prone to get into substantial arguments or negotiations. As soon as supply management, loan rate and target price issues were put on the table by the family farm groups,³ the environmental side pointed at internal differences and denied further attention to the issue for the coalition as a whole. The family farm groups, in turn, were not able to offer cooperation on environmental recoupling issues, brought forward up by individual environmental groups in spite of the absence of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. Base flexibility and price adjustments between crops at the expense of intensive crops were "immovables" for the family farm groups.

No perspectives evolved on future forms of cooperation, much

³ The participants from the family farm side were NFFC, NFU, AAM, Inc., and Interfaith Action.

to the disappointment of Kathy Ocer from the NEFC: "We actually agreed with a lot of the basic 'these are the problems'. It's just that so many of their solutions weren't really dealing with current farmers in the farm program", finding the family farm groups "caught in the middle" as they had not taken a hard line on neither the commodity nor the environmental groups' side. At that point they decided that they could serve their constituent interests more by supporting Fowler, defending the IFM, and adjusting the commodity groups' orthodox suggestions to environmental and economical interests of family farms.

Later in the process during full committee considerations in both the Senate and House, the family farm groups went into narrowly issue oriented alliances also with the Agenda Coalition, for instance supporting the circle of poison provisions and record keeping in exchange for the Agenda Coalition's support on the Minority Farmers Act. Those were, however, rather cosmetic operations.

6.2. Hapless role in traditional policymaking

Insisting on so-perceived, market-based farm incomes, but recognizing the political constraints, both NFU and NEFC were apt to adjust their political demands, although without influencing the farm bill in the desired ways. The NEFC developed a detailed scheme to target the allotment of marketing quotas to smaller and

mid-sized farmers, cutting marketing rights by 24 percent for the largest producers.⁴ Acknowledging the pressure from free trade interests, the NFU opened for a variant of a two-tier price system for wheat and feed grains, establishing marketing certificates for domestic production on high, governmental set, loan price level⁵ (as mandatory supply management would do), but allowing further production to be sold on world market price levels.⁶ Parallel demands for supply management, though, pointed at NFU limitations to make concessions.⁷

Without prospects to forward mandatory supply management in whatever variant, the family farm groups re-focused their lobbying efforts primarily on loan rate increases (the proposal at least promised to pacify the budget driven debate).⁸ If this

⁴ Waller 1990.

⁵ Loan rates are governmentally set, minimum price levels. At harvest, farmers may give their production to the so-called Commodity Credit Corporation and receive the pre-determined loan. Should market prices surpass the loan rate level, farmers may sell the crop on their own and return the loan. Should the market price stay beneath loan level, farmers keep the loan. As farmers do not need to repay their loan, it is sometimes identified as "non-recourse loan".

As loan rates provide floor prices for commodity markets, loan rates tend to raise the effective volume of production, often stored and eventually placed on the world market. To reduce their trade distorting impacts, the demand for loan rate increases is intrinsically linked to supply management.

⁶ NFU, farm bill information and discussion sheet.

⁷ A two-tier price system "ideally" is designed without supply management devices to minimize trade distortions.

⁸ The special attractiveness of higher loan rates is their lower political vulnerability in terms of budget outlays. Whereas deficiency payments (the federal payments making up the difference between federally set "target prices" and the loan

end was not politically feasible, the focus was on higher target prices, both approaches to be achieved within the framework of the traditional commodity programs.

With the redirected emphasis, the family farm groups appeared successful during early commodity-related debates in spring 1990. As has been indicated in the targeting context, the "price increase" fractions in both chambers recorded initial successes. Ignoring warnings from the administration, the House commodity subcommittees raised both loan rates and target prices during mark-ups March and April, as did the democratic Senators in a plan in mid-May. Debates, though, had only be postponed, as fiscal constraints and international trade questions dominated (full) committee debates. Expectation of a budget summit between Bush and the congressional Democrats, and the preconceived floor opposition (especially in the House) fueled the argument. Eventually, senior Democrats in both committees made a strategic compromise with Republican forces (the crucial House committee vote was on May 24, in the Senate in June 21) to freeze price support levels, amounting to a prospected farm commodity spending of some \$55 billion over the next five years.

The family farm groups' role during committee considerations was marginal. The commodity groups were in charge of the specifics within each crop program; overall spending levels were

rate level, or market prices, whichever of the two is the higher) come in form of a federal paycheck and are accounted as budget outlays (paid by taxpayers), increased loan rates increase domestic market prices and are thus paid by consumers.

negotiated between the committee leadership, the congressional leadership, and the administration. Farm income was defined in terms of commodity program spending, with none of the family farm groups apt to question farm structural impacts. With supply control being the main device to increase market-based incomes, all producers had to be provided with enough incentives to participate in the commodity programs.

With the floor vote approaching, the main emphasis of the NEU and the NFFC was to stop the Arney/Schumer amendment. Fearing the loss of leverage for affective supply control if large producers were to leave the program, the family farm groups avoided the targeting issue, and all proposals beyond the moderate Jontz/Penny one were opposed. Supporting all of the vote trading "deals" with labor and urban interests, and letting commodity interests monopolize the family farm concept was to secure a "bad" farm bill - still better than "no" farm bill.

Betting on the wrong horse - the conference

The congressional conference highlighted the helplessness of the family farms groups. High level politics started to drive the events, with even the traditional farm program interests forced to make adjustments. Even directly after the farm bill vote, House Committee Chairman Leon E. Panetta (D-Ca) spoke of a potential \$10 billion cut in farm program spending,⁹ and the

⁹ Cloud 1990 (July 28).

Administration threatened with cuts of up to \$20 billion over the five year period.¹⁰ The administration's agenda was largely trade driven, with core resistance against loan rate increases.¹¹ A budget summit in September 30¹² eventually left the farm bill conferees no choice. Weeks before the end of the legislative session, with legislators up for reelection, the conference delegation conceded to massive budget cuts - without redirecting the logic of the farm programs, though.

The conference version as passed on October 16 cut the farm programs by some \$13.6 billion, mostly affecting the commodity section with some \$11 billion in cuts. Attempting to save political face, farm-state lawmakers nominally kept loan rate and target price levels constant, but restricted the eligible acreage for deficiency payments by 15 percent and changed the method by which deficiency payments are calculated. Dairy, sugar and peanut programs were cut as well to distribute the cuts evenly. Targeting for which the budget summit had explicitly demanded was once more ignored.

¹⁰ To remind, the Administration's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) had fueled the "fat-cat farmer" critique by exposing program inequities. The Arney/Schumer amendment was drafted along the OMB's suggestions for commodity program reform.

¹¹ The ongoing GATT negotiations demanded for an anti-subsidy stance at home to fight the European Community's agricultural protectionism.

¹² In the Budget summit, the Administration was an exceptionally strong position: Bush had not lost a single veto in his first year in office, the GATT rounds demanded for anti-subsidy stances in the U.S., and the budgetary crisis was heated by the U.S. troop installment in the Persian Gulf in September 1990.

Payment cuts in that range were disastrous for large parts of the family farm constituency. Some of their lobbyists felt that they had been "sold out" in conference, as the committee leaders excluded many of the more aggressive farm legislators from conference.¹³ The family farm groups recommended to oppose the conference bill on the congressional floors. Both chambers nevertheless passed the conference reports in late October, and the President signed the bill on November 27.

Conclusions

Much of the "family farm" impact on farm policy making, and specifically the family farm groups' strategies needs to be explained in the context of the representational shortcomings. Agricultural interest representation was skewed against smaller producers, staying un-represented, co-represented (by the commodity groups), or under-represented by the relatively weak family farm groups. Even within the family organizations, relatively larger producers dominated. Most importantly, the myth of the "family farm" and the belief in "market-based" income devices had been successfully manipulated by the traditional farm bill forces, locking the family farm groups not only politically, but also ideologically into the current program structure.

¹³ Among the strongest family farm supporters, Dave Nagle (D-Iowa) became no seat, Ron Marlenee (R-Montana) had to rotate in spite of his seniority (third of 18 Republicans), Jontz was only assigned to global warming.

Blaming the committee leadership for the farm program cuts was not convincing, as the family farm groups had joined the traditional farm bill forces early on. The family farm groups were not willing to run into political risks by conceptually or strategically linking farm income to explicit social and environmental goals. The transaction costs to negotiate and enforce alternative farm programs were perceived as unsurmountable. With a financially stressed constituency, they were betting on the seemingly safe commodity program benefits. As meager policy beneficiaries, the family farm groups appeared as low risk players clinging to the program status quo in spite of their detrimental impacts on even their own constituent interests. Adding to the high transaction costs for alternative farm bill majorities, the family farm groups were willing to support the policy status quo, at the actual cost of undermining other policy challengers, and at the cost of potentially sacrificing long term opportunities for fundamental policy change more in favor of family farms.

7. Transaction costs and fundamental policy change

The research question on the ability of new policy claimants to achieve fundamental policy change was bold, or, perhaps even naive. The answer that has been given is a simple no, at least not in agricultural legislation. Even though the designated interest groups shared common reform interests, all of them (except the Natural Resources Defense Council) chose accommodational strategies. Existing programs became technically adjusted, and minor new programs have been added, but the core of the existing programs remained in place. With few exceptions, all of the policy challengers have added to the stability of the disliked, old program core, thus mutually undermining each other's reform ambitions.

The answer to this puzzling phenomenon lies within the representational and institutional bias of the policymaking system. Public interest groups and those groups representing economically deprived populations mostly do not have the political strength to challenge the established political networks. Resource restrictions, organizational maintenance prerequisites and the ambitions to achieve what is possible within the given political framework lead most groups to institutionalize their permanence in the policymaking process. Groups tend to establish exclusive issue "niches" that allow the provision of recognizable services and the creation of organizational identities among policymakers, donors and the

attentive public. Coalitions give opportunities for symbolic politics and the mobilization of media awareness, but hardly substitute for real impacts on policy.

Apparently, the institutional environment creates much of the incentives of the self-restrictive interest group behavior. Though the traditional subgovernmental era gave way to policy network patterns, the intrusion of new policy players does not necessarily challenge the exclusive control of traditional clienteles over their particular claims. Only the face, but not substance of "non-decision making", as Bachrach/Baratz phrased it,¹ changed. Competitive claims and institutional reform make the political debate more penetrable and conflict-laden, but the outcome may nevertheless be quite predictable: non-action on core issues, changes at the margins. Legislative incumbents respond to individually attributable program services, but symbolic activism and name recognition may otherwise guide policymaking on regulatory and redistributive claims. The status quo, whether it is the existing program structure or governmental inaction prevails. Public policy may largely be a consequence of interest group activism, but against the pluralist ideal, some groups are more equal than others. Lowi's castigation of interest group liberalism, charging it for the conservation of social structures, the selling out of public interests and the deligitimation of democratic institutions, may even be speeded up in the new political environment.

¹ Bachrach/Baratz 1970.

Agricultural policymaking is nevertheless a special case - in many other policy fields such as energy, other parts of the environmental agenda and social regulation, conflictual claims did result in substantial policy change. First, agricultural interest representation is highly effective in terms of organizational strength and political clout. The family farm myth allowed business interests to live on a largely uncontested, quasi-public interest.

Second, agricultural policymaking is institutionally protected not only by the fragmentation of the political system, but enjoys the additional privilege to represent many vested interests outside agriculture. Specifically, the farm bill served as vehicle for poverty and food aid advocates, labor unions and shippers, and many others. Those external interests see their fate linked to the maintenance and extension of a bill that in large parts is of no interest to them. Alternative vehicles, however, are not readily available. New policy challengers especially from the public interest sector may find many of their "genuine" legislative friends already committed to supportive positions. Garnering majorities for even parts of the farm bill, not to speak about reforms in its core, commodity programs, affords enormous transaction costs. (Potential) farm bill challengers have neither a symbolic "clamp" that holds their case together, nor do they have an institutional forum to negotiate and enforce a reform package. For the broad nature and complexity of agricultural legislation and its attached provisions, the main

bottleneck for reform coalitions may be perception: without an obvious common interest on the decisive, technical program level, there will be no common action. Without mechanisms of compliance, members of reform potential coalitions can be selectively "pacified" by the traditional farm bill forces. Among new policy claimants, mutual distrust prevails, furthering the competition for policy "crumbs" within the old framework. Fragmented reward structures lock potentially challenging interest groups and legislators alike in a disliked system; the pursuit of fundamental reform efforts is foolish on an individual level.

Whether this thesis should, as so many other works on American politics, conclude with the demand for a European-type, institutional centralization may be questionable. Political economists are skeptical, (Olson, Hayes) as centralized policymaking bodies can be exploited by centralized representational institutions (business associations and labor unions). Neocorporatists may disagree, but policy outcomes at least in the West-European agricultural arena appear to have also accelerated the farm consolidation and intensification process.

Alternatively, one may point at Kingdon's policy window parable, warning that structural "over"adjustment may lead to not recognizing sudden openings of the timely interplay of perceptual changes and political alignments. Would the agricultural challengers have been able to "tear down" the farm bill, as one congressional staffer described it, if they had early on perceived the budgetary, presidential and macro-

economical pressures? Would short time shocks rekindle the long term perceptions of fundamental policy alternatives?

Coalition building, policy entrepreneurship, and transaction costs

The 1990 farm bill process featured that coalition building is a crucial bottleneck to achieve major policy change. Early in the process, the conservation coalition appeared as the organizational forum for a united reform effort of the environmental and sustainable agriculture groups. Although its institutionalized character lowered the transaction costs for coordinated strategies, the number of participants was rather high, and the circle did not guarantee strategic secrecy.² The conservation coalition fell apart when some of the most influential environmental groups found that it could not serve their political goals. During much of 1989, conceptual uncertainty over conservation/environmental strategies created a political vacuum.

Interestingly enough, such a small and recently formed group as the Center for Resource Economics did fill that vacuum. Only a policy entrepreneur without member commitments and political pledges, but instead furnished with flexible political and media

² Several groups that were members of the Conservation Coalition joined the commodity groups; for instance, the National Association of Conservation Districts and the Wildlife Management Institute.

connections was able and willing to join agendas and political actors. With links into both agricultural committees, the Center for Resource Economics translated the acceptable demand structure into a political agenda, thus reducing complexity and dynamics of most other groups being preoccupied with organizational "niches". In many ways, Cook appeared as "risk manager" of both the agricultural and environmental camp, lowering transaction costs to enable safe, if not always liked political decisions.

The maintenance of the Environmental and Consumer Agenda - Coalition (Agenda Coalition), however, was a difficult task, demonstrating the fragility of coalition building. Towards the end of the process, the coalition interaction was limited to signing each others recommendation letters. Only the lack of better alternatives prevented the groups from splitting formally from the arrangement. As already the relatively small environmental coalition seemed hardly functionable, a "coalition for fundamental policy reform" seemed improbable. Combining issue complexity, decentralized political institutions, and the fragmented interest group landscape, policymaking seems invariably biased against fundamental policy reform. Coalition building appears as Sisyphus work, necessarily short term oriented to exploit temporary opportunities.

Lowering transaction costs for fundamental policy change

Much of the inability to overcome parochial views has to do

with perception. Ken Cook (Center for Resource Economics) and Maureen Hinkle (Audubon Society) were successful in uniting the environmental groups under the heading "source reduction strategies", the marriage of best management practices (science) and scrutinized farm practices (bureaucratic regulation). Whether this marriage will endure another farm bill, though, might be somewhat questionable, as the first, science approach, is carried by the United States Department of Agriculture and the land grant system, whereas the second may need the environmental oriented Environmental Protection Agency. The United States Department of Agriculture has frustrated many regulatory efforts in the 1985 farm bill, and with the prospect of tight monies in the federal budget process, source reduction in the form of "sponsored regulation" might not fulfill what it promised.

As desirable as applied technology is to make farming practices more environmentally benign, it can be nothing but a first step. Economic variables are still in place that reward high-input production practices. For much of the environmental community, the long term strategic question might be whether they perceive themselves capable of regulating the farm firm sector versus trying to find allies within the agricultural sector to redirect program payments to reward environmentally more benign practices. Sustainable agriculture advocates wanted to provide the metaphorical clamp for such a coalition, recoupling payments to reward "landstewards" for a "sustainable" farm and rural economy. Sustainable agriculture, however, was a rather recent, little

known concept with too few adherents to make much of a political impact.

The "family farm" symbol may be more able to mobilize public support. In the context of the 1990 farm bill, however, the "family farm" notion was not a strategic asset for environmental reform interests. Bought into the current program structure, and underrepresented by the current interest group system, family farm interests played a rather hapless role. Market based incomes, whether real or only "so-perceived", do not reward environmentally sound production structures. It reflects some degree of schizophrenia that the family farm groups were among the strongest supporters of the sustainable agriculture program options, but otherwise among the opposition as to questions of large scale changes.

Symbolic "clamps" to lower transaction costs and connect the agri-political concerns of environmental and urban-liberal with family farm interests may be available nevertheless, possibly revolving around the notions of "environmental stewardship" or "sustainability". The political transaction costs have been reduced already, as the 1990 farm bill process, especially in the House, illustrated the vulnerability of the traditional farm bill. The "fat-cat" payment issue was a prime media focus. Had the main environmental groups opted differently, the Arney/Schumer vote might have come close to a political tie. With parts of the farming community in support of a targeting-adjusted amendment, the committee would have lost. Short term impasses on

farm legislation would, in the long run, dramatically change the premises of farm policy making. Skillful policy entrepreneurship might eventually unite an alternative reform coalition.

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