

# *An Evaluation of* FARMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD FARM POLICY

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## Introduction

Farmers' acceptance of government price support and related agricultural adjustment programs is an important factor explaining the overall success of such programs. Heady suggests that goals and values play a major role in farmers' reaction to farm programs (1). Hatesohl, in analyzing farmers' attitudes in public policy concluded that farmers' preferences for farm programs are related to attitudes toward the government's role in economic affairs, government costs, and past program administration (2). Hatesohl's study was conducted in the winter wheat areas of Kansas and Oklahoma in 1964.

The environment surrounding the spring wheat producer is somewhat different than that facing the winter wheat producer. For example, the growing season is different, the market outlets and uses are different, and the cultural background of the people are different—thus, attitudes and values are affected.

## Objectives

The Food and Agricultural Act of 1965 expires in 1970 unless extended or replaced. The Congress, the administration, farm groups and others are actively engaged in the development of farm legislation. Input of the farmer is crucial in the formulation process. The fundamental purpose of the research reported in this article is to obtain a more complete understanding of the factors which influence farmers' acceptability of agricultural policy and farm programs. What do farmers believe is the cause of the economic problems they face? What do farmers believe should be the major objectives of farm programs? What approaches to raising farm income would be the most acceptable to farmers? Only by understanding farmers' attitudes and values on certain key issues can an effective dialogue be maintained between farmers and policy formulators and decision makers.

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## Method of Study

The basic information necessary to identify farmers' values and attitudes was obtained through use of a mail survey. A questionnaire was designed to obtain farmers' reactions to statements in six general areas: (1) causes of the current farm problem, (2) what a government farm program for grain crops should accomplish, (3) degree of acceptance of selected general farm programs, (4) means of raising farm income, (5) farm programs and farming in general and (6) additional ways of dealing with the farm problem.

An adaptation of the Likert scale was used in obtaining attitudes. In this procedure, the respondent is given a single statement or a number of statements considered descriptive of attitudes toward a specific area. The respondent then indicates the extent of his agreement or disagreement on a five point scale: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree.

Grain producers in North Dakota served as the population for the study. There are about 38,000 grain producers in North Dakota. A sample representing 3,855 grain producers was selected to receive the mail questionnaire. A random sampling technique was used to select the sample. The sample was stratified by county and farm size.

## Survey Response

The results of the study are based on completed questionnaires returned by 1,817 of the 3,855 farmers and ranchers included in the sample. This represents a 47 per cent return.

The farmers responding to the questionnaire had an average farm size of 1,169 acres, of which 847 acres were owned. Other characteristics of the sample farms indicated an average cropland acreage of 794 acres of which 585 acres were owned; a wheat allotment of 242 acres; a feed grain base of 165 acres and a 213-acre conserving base.

## Results

The results of the survey are presented in Tables 1 to 6. The degree to which the respondents agreed or disagreed with each statement are presented in terms of percentages. For example, for the first statement in Table 1 "Farmers lack bar-

Table 1. Farmers' opinions on causes of the current farm problem, North Dakota.

	Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Undecided (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly Disagree (5)	Average Response	Major Cause
	Per Cent Response*						Per Cent Response**
a. Farmers lack bargaining power	57	32	5	3	3	1.63	24
b. High wages in industry cause high prices for what the farmer buys	54	33	4	6	3	1.71	20
c. High costs of processing and marketing after products leave the farm	43	37	7	8	5	1.95	14
d. Declining political influence of farm congressmen	35	39	14	8	4	2.07	4
e. Farmers try to increase their income by increasing production	30	45	5	13	7	2.22	6
f. Ownership of land and other production resources by nonfarmers	36	32	13	11	8	2.23	9
g. Increased use of fertilizer, improved seed, irrigation and big machinery	15	33	14	24	14	2.89	12
h. Past government farm programs	16	23	22	25	14	2.98	7
i. More cropland in agriculture than is needed to meet the demand	15	28	15	26	16	3.00	3
j. Farmers can get credit too easily	11	20	15	37	17	3.29	1
k. Reduction in number of farms has occurred too slowly	2	3	10	32	53	4.31	0

\*The percentages reflect the degree to which the farmers agreed or disagreed with each of the statements.

\*\*The percentages reflect the proportion of farmers indicating each statement as the major cause of the current farm problem.

gaining power", 57 per cent of the respondents answering this question strongly agreed with the statement, 32 per cent agreed, 5 per cent were undecided, 3 per cent disagreed and 3 per cent strongly disagreed. For the last statement in Table 1, "Reduction in number of farms has occurred too slowly"; 2 per cent strongly agreed, 3 per cent agreed, 10 per cent were undecided, 32 per cent disagree, and 53 per cent strongly disagreed.

Scale scores where multiple statements are used were computed as follows: If the respondent marked "strongly agree" on a statement, that indicated a positive or favorable response consistent with an attitude and a score of one was given; "agree" was given a scale score of two; and so on to a score of five for a "strongly disagree". The scale scores for all the respondents were totaled and an average response for each statement determined. For example, the average response to the first statement in Table 1 was 1.63, which indicates that the average response to this statement lies between strongly agree (1) and agree (2). The average response to the last statement was 4.31, which

places farmers response between disagree (4) and strongly disagree (5). The statements in Tables 1 to 6 are ranked according to the statements which the farmers most strongly agreed with to those which the farmers most strongly disagreed with.

#### Causes of the Current Farm Problem

Farmers' attitudes toward the causes of the current farm problem are presented in Table 1. The first three statements were indicated by farmers as the most important causes of the current farm problem, and had an average response of less than two or an average response falling between agree and strongly agree. These statements dealt with the cost-price squeeze, or the high cost of purchasing production resources and the low prices received for farm commodities. Of these, the statement most strongly indicated as the cause of the current farm problem pertained to the lack of bargaining power employed by farmers in the market place.

The respondents were rather undecided as to the effect past government farm programs have

had on the current farm problem with an average response of 2.98. However, a 2.07 average response indicated agreement with the statement pertaining to the declining political influence of farm congressmen.

Four statements pertain to the problem of over-production in agriculture; "Farmers try to increase their income by increasing production", "Increased use of fertilizer, improved seed, irrigation and big machinery", "More cropland in agriculture than is needed to meet the demand", and "Reduction in number of farms has occurred too slowly". Respondents moderately agreed with the first two statements as causes of the current farm problem with average responses of 2.22 and 2.89 respectively. The statement pertaining to the over-supply of cropland in agriculture received an average response of 3.00 which indicated farmers were undecided as to whether this statement was a cause of the farm problem. However, the statement pertaining to the reduction in farm numbers met with strong disagreement—an average response of 4.31.

Many of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with more than one of the statements. Therefore, the farmers were asked which statement

they thought was the major cause of the current farm problem. Of the 1,817 respondents, only 41 per cent of the farmers answered this question. The percentage results of the respondents answering this question are presented in the last column of Table 1. Of those responding, 24 per cent indicated the statement referring to farmers lack of bargaining power as the major cause of the current farm problem. None of the respondents indicated the statement referring to the slow reduction in farm numbers as the major cause.

### Objectives Farm Programs Should Accomplish

Farmers' attitudes towards the objectives farm programs should accomplish are presented in Table 2. The first four statements were indicated most strongly by farmers as the objectives farm programs should accomplish, and had average responses of less than two or average responses falling between agree and strongly agree. These statements pertain directly to raising and stabilizing farm income and commodity prices. Of these, the statement most strongly indicated by respondents as the objective a government farm program should accomplish had an average response of 1.53 and

Table 2. Farmers' opinions as to what a government farm program for grain crops should accomplish, North Dakota.

	Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Undecided (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly Disagree (5)	Average Response	Major Objective
	Per Cent Response*					Per Cent Response**	
a. Encourage the export of agricultural products	58	36	3	1	2	1.53	10
b. Increase farmers' income	51	40	6	2	1	1.62	20
c. Keep grain prices at 100 per cent parity	56	30	7	5	2	1.67	26
d. Provide for price stability	42	44	9	3	2	1.79	8
e. Keep down government expenses	38	38	10	10	4	2.04	6
f. Keep farm production in line with market demand	27	51	12	7	3	2.08	15
g. Keep government regulations to a minimum	24	46	12	13	5	2.29	3
h. Allow farmers to specialize to keep production costs down	13	40	26	15	6	2.61	6
i. Keep food prices low	14	28	19	28	11	2.94	2
j. Give farmers freedom to produce and market as they wish	15	17	18	28	22	3.25	4

\*The percentages reflect the degree to which the farmers agreed or disagreed with each of the statements.

\*\*The percentages reflect the proportion of farmers indicating each statement as the major objective which a government farm program for grain crops should accomplish.

Table 3. Farmers' opinions on proposed farm programs for grain crops, North Dakota.

	Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Undecided (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly Disagree (5)	Average Response	Most Preferred Program	Least Preferred Program
	Per Cent Response*					Per Cent Response**		
a. A voluntary program involving wheat and grain diversion. Producer is free to plant any crop on his non-diverted acreage. Certificate and price support payment would be received for compliance.	16	46	17	14	7	2.50	22	3
b. A voluntary program establishing a grain base on each farm. Wheat certificates are paid for maintaining a conserving base. Farmers are free to plant any crop on grain base acreage. Diversion payments are made for diverting any portion of the grain base acreage.	13	44	25	12	6	2.54	18	4
c. The 1970 type of program	13	41	19	19	8	2.68	26	5
d. Mandatory controls with higher price supports but no diversion payments	10	19	23	32	16	3.25	13	8
e. Return agriculture to a more flexible market. Lower price supports and higher CCC release prices with some provisions for direct payments to maintain farm income during the adjustment period.	4	15	26	31	24	3.56	5	3
f. Long-term land retirement with emphasis on whole farm retirement (price supports and loan program included, but no acreage controls, no certificate payments, and no price support payments).	9	10	14	23	44	3.83	10	29
g. Free market (no acreage allotments, no price or income supports)	5	4	11	23	57	4.23	6	48

\*The percentages reflect the degree to which farmers agreed or disagreed with each of the statements.

\*\*The percentages reflect the proportion of farmers that most preferred each program and the number of farmers that least preferred each program.

pertained to encouraging the export of agricultural products.

The remaining statements generally do not pertain to farmer price or income. Such objectives as keeping government expenses and regulations to a minimum, and keeping food prices low only met with moderate agreement. The only statement meeting with disagreement had an average response of 3.25 and referred to giving farmers freedom to produce and market as they wished.

The farmers were asked which statement was the major objective a government farm program should accomplish. The percentage response of those answering this question are presented in the last column of Table 2. Only 48 per cent of the respondents answered this question. Of those re-

sponding, 20 per cent indicated increasing farmers income and 26 per cent indicated keeping grain prices at 100 per cent parity as the major objective a farm program should accomplish. However, only 10 per cent indicated the statement having the most favorable average response dealing with encouraging the export of agricultural products.

#### Alternative General Farm Programs

Farmers' attitudes toward alternative general farm programs are presented in Table 3. The first three proposed farm programs met with moderate agreement, and had average responses between two and three or an average response falling between agree and undecided. These three statements of proposed farm programs referred to the 1970 farm program and two programs proposed by Secretary

of Agriculture Clifford M. Hardin. The Secretary's proposals were favored over the 1970 program, receiving average responses of 2.50 and 2.54 and the 1970 program receiving an average response of 2.68.

The four remaining statements received responses of general disagreement with the first of these pertaining to mandatory controls with higher price supports but no diversion payments. Mandatory control was favored over returning agriculture to a more flexible market with lower price supports, higher CCC release prices, and direct payments for maintaining farm income. Long-term, whole-farm land retirement was the least popular of all proposed programs but was favored over returning farming to a free market with no acreage allotments or price and income supports.

Many of the respondents strongly agreed or strongly disagreed with more than one of the statements. Therefore, the farmers were asked which of the proposed farm programs they preferred most and which they preferred least. The percentage results of the respondents answering

these questions are presented in the last two columns of Table 3. Of the 1,817 farmers returning the questionnaire, 73 per cent of the respondents answered these questions. Of those responding, 26 per cent preferred the 1970 program over the other programs listed and 5 per cent least preferred the 1970 program. Returning farming to a free market was preferred by 6 per cent of the respondents while 48 per cent of the respondents least preferred returning farming to a free market.

#### Means of Raising Net Farm Income

Farmers attitudes towards alternative means of raising net farm income are presented in Table 4. The first statement "Find more uses for farm products" received the strongest agreement as a means of raising net farm income, with an average response of 1.57. Other statements receiving farmer agreement referred to reducing marketing and processing margins of middlemen, continuing the 1970 type of farm program with higher price supports and payments, reducing farmers' costs to grow grain crops, and increasing exports with government subsidies.

**Table 4. Farmers' opinions on the potentiality of the following statements as means of raising net farm income, North Dakota.**

	(1) Strongly Agree	(2) Agree	(3) Undecided	(4) Disagree	(5) Strongly Disagree	Average Response	
	Per Cent Response*						Per Cent Response**
a. Find more uses for farm products	50	46	2	1	1	1.57	27
b. Reduce the marketing and processing margins of the middlemen	39	43	10	6	2	1.89	17
c. Continue present government programs, but raise the level of support prices and government payments	35	38	11	11	5	2.13	27
d. Reduce farmers' costs to grow grain crops	26	50	10	10	4	2.16	9
e. Increase exports with government subsidies or donations if necessary	20	42	19	13	6	2.43	12
f. Use government control of supply of farm products going to market	9	19	25	29	18	3.29	3
g. Increase the price of food	6	13	19	40	22	3.59	2
h. Make it easier for farmers to move off the farm through income benefits, more readily available retraining opportunities, and expanded job opportunities so that there is more "income" for those remaining	7	13	18	29	33	3.68	3

\*The percentages reflect the degree to which farmers agreed or disagreed with each of the statements.

\*\*The percentages reflect the proportion of farmers indicating each statement as having the greatest potential as a means of raising net farm income.

Table 5. Farmers' opinions on programs proposed as additional ways to deal with the farm problem, North Dakota.

	(1) Strongly Agree	(2) Agree	(3) Undecided	(4) Disagree	(5) Strongly Disagree	Average Response
	Per Cent Response*					
a. An organization of farmers with government assistance, such as National Agricultural Relations Board and expanded marketing orders to raise farm income	18	47	22	8	5	2.35
b. An organization of farmers themselves (independent of the government) would control production and raise farm prices and income	18	24	24	21	13	2.87
c. Allotment would be based on bushels rather than acres	20	23	20	19	18	2.92
d. The government would pay an adequate financial grant to train and move to some nonfarm job those farmers who have income problems	5	21	24	30	20	3.39
e. The government would buy whole farms and combine several farms to be used for public recreation or leased for grazing	3	5	10	29	53	4.24
f. Wheat allotment would be bought and sold among farmers so that allotments would eventually end up in the hands of those who could make the best use of them	2	4	10	29	55	4.31

\*The percentages reflect the degree to which farmers agreed or disagreed with each of the statements.

Three statements received moderate disagreement. Respondents disagreed with increasing the price of food and using the government to control the supply of farm products going to market. The statement referring to making it easier for farmers to move off the farm so that there is more income for those remaining received the least favor as a means of raising net farm income, with an average response of 3.68.

The farmers were asked which statement had the greatest potential as a means of raising net farm income. The percentage results of the respondents answering this question are presented in the last column of Table 4. Only 65 per cent of the respondents answered this question. Of those responding, 27 per cent indicated finding more uses for farm products as the major means of raising net farm income. The statement pertaining to continuing the 1970 type of program was indicated by another 27 per cent of the respondents as the major means of raising net farm income. Only two per cent indicated that the price of food should be increased as a means of increasing farm income.

#### Additional Ways of Dealing with the Farm Problem

Proposed additional ways of dealing with the farm problem are presented in Table 5. Three of these proposals were generally accepted and the remaining three were generally rejected. The two most popular statements referred to developing farmer organizations with and without government assistance to raise farm income. These statements had average responses of 2.35 and 2.87. The other statement receiving acceptance referred to basing allotments on bushels rather than acres.

A statement referring to paying a financial grant to train farm people for nonfarm employment received slight disagreement with an average response of 3.39. The remaining two statements referring to government purchase of whole farms, and buying and selling allotments between farmers met with strong disagreement.

#### Selected Statements Often Made About Farm Programs and Farming in General

Farmers' opinions on selected statements often made about farm programs or farming in general

are presented in Table 6. The statement receiving the most agreement pertained to the importance of keeping up with farm programs and had an average response of 1.83. The statement "Establish a maximum limit of \$20,000 on the amount of government payments made to an individual farmer" also received strong support with an average response of 1.85. Respondents strongly agreed that an opportunity to farm should be provided for all boys who want to farm. However, the statements pertaining to the government's responsibility to support farm prices and income, and the government's responsibility to see that every farmer makes a decent living only met with moderate agreement. Respondents agreed that it is possible to set up an allotment system that is fair to all

farmers but disagreed that what a farmer has grown in the past is a good way to figure allotments for the future. The statement referring to poorly administered wheat programs met with moderate agreement. The last statement; "Many farmers are content with a lower cash income than city people because of the advantages of a farm life" received the least favorable response of all statements, with an average response of 3.30.

#### References

1. Heady, Earl O., and Burchinal, Lee G., "The Concern with Goals and Values in Agriculture," in *Goals and Values in Agricultural Policy*, Iowa State University Press, Ames, 1961.
2. Hatesohl, Delmar Edward, *The Measurement and Role of Farmers' Attitudes in Public Policy*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, May, 1966.

Table 6. Farmers' opinions on selected statements often made about farm programs or farming in general, North Dakota

	(1) Strongly Agree	(2) Agree	(3) Undecided	(4) Disagree	(5) Strongly Disagree	Average Response
	Per Cent Response*					
a. Keeping up on farm programs is just as important as knowing about the latest feeding and fertilizing practices	34	56	5	3	2	1.83
b. Establish a maximum limit of \$20,000 on the amount of government payments made to an individual farmer	56	24	6	7	7	1.85
c. It is important to provide an opportunity to farm for all boys who want to farm	39	40	8	10	3	1.98
d. Release of soil bank for grazing when declared an emergency area	31	45	5	9	10	2.22
e. It is possible to set up an allotment system that is fair to all farmers	23	38	18	15	6	2.43
f. It is the government's responsibility to support farm prices and income	21	35	21	16	7	2.53
g. Wheat programs have been poorly run (administered) in the past	22	31	21	20	6	2.57
h. The government should see that every farmer makes a decent living	23	26	14	27	10	2.75
i. Permit grazing on diverted land on a regulated basis	13	34	12	21	20	3.01
j. What a farmer has grown in the past is a good way to figure allotments for the future	8	31	13	30	18	3.19
k. Many farmers are content with a lower cash income than city people because of the advantages of farm life	8	31	8	29	24	3.30

\*The percentages reflect the degree to which farmers agreed or disagreed with each of the statements.