

Do Farms Provide More Than Food? Public Perspectives in California

by

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Focus groups in two locations in California were used to examine preferences of town residents, rural residents and farmers for reducing the negative environmental externalities from agriculture, preserving farmland, and protecting farmland from development.

Positive benefits from agriculture production, beyond producing food and fiber, include the viability of rural communities, open space, biodiversity, cultural heritage, flood prevention, wildlife habitat and scenic landscape. The multifunctionality of agriculture is increasingly important in the design of agricultural and rural policy, including the regulation of agricultural production. Government payments to agriculture in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries are becoming conditional on meeting the objective of enhancing the positive multifunctional characteristics of agriculture. New policies include non-trade concerns such as food security, the viability of rural communities and protecting the environment. In particular, protecting the environment means reducing negative externalities from agriculture, such as water pollution, dust and noise.

Ideally, the objectives emphasized by “multifunctional” policies should reflect preferences across all functions of agriculture. Social preferences for benefits from agriculture and avoiding externalities are undoubtedly different between geographic regions and across stakeholders. In our research project, we examined social preferences in California for the three objectives of reducing the negative environmental externalities produced by agriculture, preserving farmland and protecting the open spaces currently used for agricultural production from urban or suburban development. Empirically, we used focus groups to establish our evidence. We conducted a series of focus groups in two locations, Winters in the Sacramento Valley and Watsonville on the central coast. In each place we had three groups of five to ten participants: town residents, rural residents and farmers. Each of the focus groups

asked the participants to describe any interactions they had with agriculture in their area. They were then asked about the positive and negative aspects they perceived from agriculture, and their wish list for farmland in their county for the next ten to thirty years. Finally, participants were asked to define open space. The results for the three types of participants are presented below.

Town Residents

The Winters town residents talked about the benefits of living in a small town, especially the lack of congestion. The most important benefits from agriculture were lower stress, decreased crowding and a healthier environment. In Watsonville, the town residents discussed the high rent of the land, and the high cost of housing in the area due to the demographic pressure from people commuting to San Jose. In addition to the positive aspects mentioned in Winters, they identified eating high quality fresh local produce and waste recycling as direct benefits from agriculture.

When asked about things that they would like changed, the Winters group mentioned stopping the burning of rice straw and increased public open space

as a contingency against development. In Watsonville, there were two additional concerns: inadequate farmworker housing and the lack of young people entering farming. In both locations, town residents strongly supported clean air and access to open space.

When asked about their wish list for the next 10-30 years, the Winters group expressed concerns about the preservation of family farms in the area, planned growth, agriculture in public education, and the creating and maintenance of open space between development. In Watsonville, the town residents’

“Multifunctionality refers to the fact that an economic activity may have multiple outputs and, by virtue of this, may contribute to several societal objectives at once.” (OECD, 2001)



Walnut orchard bordering a residential neighborhood in Winters, located in the Central Valley of California.

Photo by Karen Klonsky

wishes included more organic agriculture, smaller companies and better water management. Overall, the Watsonville town residents placed more importance on reducing pollution from agriculture, and the Winters residents talked more about public access and wildlife as side benefits of agriculture.

Significantly, there were interesting discussions regarding open space and farmland in both groups, as well as in the rural resident groups (see below). In the Winters groups, several residents did not think that farmland was open space unless there was public access. In the Watsonville groups, participants did not view farmland as open space at all. For them, farmland is a space holder that slows development but does not provide public access and wildlife habitat in the way that parks and nature reserves do.

Rural Residents

In the Winters rural residents group, most participants had lived in the area for many years. They had a broader list of benefits from agriculture than the town residents. They talked about the relief from congestion, the importance of food security and the provision of wildlife habitat directly near their homes. In the Watsonville group, the residents came from a broad geographic area surrounding the town. Their list of benefits from agriculture included delivery of fresh produce, children interacting with nature, beautiful scenery, personal safety and rural landscapes.

When asked about the negatives of agriculture, members of this group were much more specific about agricultural practices in the area than the town residents were. In Winters, they talked about high-speed tomato trucks in the area, being awakened by crop dusters early in the morning, rice burning, pesticides, the high use of water and the dust created by farming operations. They also discussed restricted access to land and zoning restrictions related to purchasing and dividing farmland. In Watsonville, the group talked about the pesticides, chemicals and runoff, the odors and noises, and the plastic in the strawberry fields. The discussion was turned toward the health risks from exposure to pesticides

When asked about their wish list for the next 10 to 30 years the discussion in Winters turned to infrastructure. They talked about open space and access to hiking trails. They wanted farming to become more efficient and reduce its use of water, fertilizers and pesticides. They also wanted farmers to become less dependent on government subsidies. In Watsonville, much of the attention was turned toward the reduction of chemicals, but also the question of farm worker housing. Several people mentioned the increase of organic food. They discussed habitat only in the context of land out of agricultural production. One urban resident said that a benefit from farming was that it kept houses from being built, so the view of the ocean was not blocked from the highway. There was a much greater concern with local negative environmental impacts from agriculture in Watsonville than in Winters.

Farmers

In Winters, the farmers immediately mentioned the importance of farms providing wildlife habitat. They argued that the presence of farmland was a benefit to people from the cities who come out to the country on the weekends for drives or bicycle rides. To them, viewing the farmland was equivalent to access to farmland; farmland was synonymous with open space. The farmers also talked about food security and the risk of shifting farmland into wildlife habitat and out of production. Food was viewed as a necessity and parks as a luxury. In Watsonville, the farmers only mentioned wildlife among other benefits. In their view, agriculture provides a range

of services, from land care to maintenance of open space and reducing development growth, and also providing employment opportunities. Also, agriculture appeared to them as the main support for fresh air, water and oxygen.

When asked about the negative impacts of farming, the farmers of Winters instead began to talk about the problems that farmers now face. These included difficulty in making a living, low margins, access to water, farmer dependence on government subsidies, problems due to the enforcement of the Endangered Species Act and the omnipotent threat of development. They did finally mention problems of soil erosion, loss of topsoil, air pollution, salt build-up, and groundwater depletion. Their wish list included better services from the county, including fire and water, stopping the dumping of garbage on farm property, and a slowing of development even though they owned land that had potential for development.

The rest of their comments pertained to ways to improve profitability from farming. In Watsonville, the negative aspects of farming included pesticides, methyl bromide, runoff, salt buildup, low-quality labor and noise. Their wish list also emphasized reducing the number of complex regulations which prevent them from "breathing" in their activity. The farmers also talked about the possibility of going to agro-tourism, to have more organic farmland, and, mainly, to keep land in agriculture.

Conclusion

Based on these results, we suggest some direction for multifunctional policies in agriculture in California. California's rural landscape is already in the process of change. Some existing programs encourage farmers to voluntarily enter into contracts to keep their land in agriculture. In the valley, farmland preservation is defined as a public priority to reduce the expansion of towns. This also includes improving urban planning to accommodate population increase while maintaining the agricultural character of the valley. Residents and farmers agree on these common objectives. Public policy will be likely to follow these goals as a priority. On the coast, the public seems to prefer spending public money for the reduction of environmental externalities, for either more



Field of calla lilies, with the Pacific Ocean as a backdrop, outside of Watsonville on the Central Coast of California.

Photo by Karen Klonsky

stringent regulations of agricultural production or to support the use of less intensive practices. This does not follow the farmers' interests, who would prefer to reduce the regulatory pressure and let the farmers be the stewards of the land. Supporting the preservation of farmland as a multifunctional objective may not be compatible with the increase of environmental regulatory pressure. This conflict of interest is likely to be present among pressure groups at the legislative level, where farming groups and agricultural interest groups will compete with environmental groups. This situation may lead to a separation of public preferences from public policy.

To design multifunctional policies in California, it is necessary to account for the diversity of landscapes and environmental conditions. Local authorities could help make sure the state policies respect this diversity of objectives.

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