

The many aspects of agricultural policy

From the beginning in July 2000, this column has been focused on agricultural policy and how various policies affect producers and consumers alike. Some of these policies focus on crops and methods of supporting a robust and sustainable agriculture in the US and around the world, but a large number do not.

For many, the mention of agricultural policy takes their minds back to stories of the Dirty Thirties, the dust bowl, and folks from Oklahoma loading up their meager possessions on an old vehicle to make the trek to California and the hope of work. To support those who remained on the land, we saw the development of policies to support farm prices.

But agricultural policy is much older than that.

Its earliest roots are still being explored by archaeologists and anthropologists who are examining traces of human activity tens of millennia ago when humans worked together to bring down megafauna. The questions that intrigue scholars include how the group was organized and how the various parts of the animal—meat, hide, bones, teeth—were distributed among both direct participants and their families.

An article, “Civilization Begins” in the July/August 2020 issue of *Minerva: Archaeology and Ancient Art* traces the beginning of writing to Copper Age Mesopotamia and the need of communities of 100,000 to keep track of “Who owed what to what to whom? How many bushels of barley and honey? How many fleeces or hides? What was held in store, and what disbursements were due?”

Four millennia later, in the US the purchase or military theft of land from the indigenous population was a form of agricultural policy, making farmland available for European settlers to cultivate. The use of slaves and indentured servants in agricultural production and processing were both forms of agricultural policy as was the ending of slavery with the Civil War and the ensuing period of segregation and tenant farming.

For the two of us, agricultural policy includes public policies that touch on any aspect of food production, distribution, and consumption.

At present one of the most crucial agricultural policy issues is global warming. How we deal with the need to become net negative in the release of greenhouse gasses will have a major impact on agricultural production. Many in the agricultural community are worried about an increase in regulations that require farmers to implement practices that reduce/eliminate the emission of methane.

Quite frankly, we are less worried about the impact of government regulations on agricultural practices than we are about the impact of climate change on the productivity and location of agricultural production. A year or two of extreme heat and drought like we have seen in some areas of the country, or superstorms and flooding elsewhere could bankrupt more farmers than any environmental regulation that has been proposed.

In addition, these events can reduce the level of agricultural production that could quickly increase hunger and malnutrition in the US and around the world.

Beyond environmental issues like global warming, agricultural policy includes regulations regarding labor, food and health, transportation, consolidation and mergers of firms involved in the production of farm inputs and the processing and marketing of agricultural products.

Over the years, in the writing of this column, we have sometimes looked at agricultural policy through a microscope focusing on a small but important technical area, while at other

times we have peered through a telescope to remind ourselves that the lives of over 8 billion people depend on the maintenance of a sustainable agricultural production system.

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Dr. Harwood D. Schaffer: Adjunct Research Assistant Professor, Sociology Department, University of Tennessee and Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center. Dr. Daryll E. Ray: Emeritus Professor, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee and Retired Director, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center.

Email: hdschaffer@utk.edu and dray@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>.

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