

Future Agendas for Sustainable Agriculture in the United States: Policies and Prospects

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Introduction

My remarks, in general, will address two broad themes. First, I want to briefly describe and analyze the evolving history of the sustainable agriculture agenda in this country. Developments over the past 15 to 20 years in the sustainable agricultural movement have important implications for the future of public agricultural policy in this country. This history goes far beyond farm bills and other related legislation. It influences and pervades all of our discussions, understandings, and perceptions about what sustainable agriculture is and what the policy agenda for advancing it ought to include.

Second, I want to discuss what I view as an important new development in the agenda-setting process for a sustainable agriculture; namely, the recent entry of the executive branch of the federal government into this debate. If the Clinton administration maintains its current level of support and policy development for sustainable agriculture, it is going to have enormous implications for the future pace and direction of change in this evolving policy arena.

The Historical Setting

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there began to evolve in the United States a critical critique of conventional agriculture. However, these early critics, such as Rachel Carson, J. I. Rodale, Robert Rodale, and others, rarely, if ever, referred to low-input alternative systems and technologies as sustainable.

Indeed, when these and other organic spokespersons noted the value of crop rotations, biological pest control, and other cultural and management practices that characterize organic production systems, they simply said that these technologies and systems could help address such problems and issues as soil erosion, soil compaction, the loss of soil organic matter, the loss of biodiversity, the decline of family farms and rural communities, and social justice. They did not assert that such practices were sustainable. And, of course, there is a huge difference - politically and symbolically - between saying, for example, that a legume-based rotation can help address problems such as soil erosion and soil quality, and saying that such a rotation is sustainable.

Why and when did these early critics of conventional agriculture, mostly growing out of the organic farming movement of the 1960s and 1970s and consisting largely of organic practitioners and advocates, adopt the term sustainable agriculture to describe these reduced chemical systems?

The USDA Organic Farming Report

Much of the explanation lies in the aftermath of the 1980 USDA Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming. With that report, USDA had finally done what the organic farming community had hoped it would do for nearly two decades: it conducted a fair and objective investigation of organic farming. I can still hear the late Bob Rodale saying, "Just come and look. Just come and look at these systems: we think you'll like what you see." In essence, this is what happened after then Secretary of Agriculture, Bob Bergland, commissioned a team of USDA scientists in 1979 to conduct a study of organic farming in the United States.

In 1979-80, however, there really was no comprehensive and integrated policy agenda for organic farming. There had been very little thinking about what kind of policy structure or set of incentives and disincentives could lead to what today we think of as sustainable agriculture. The agenda was limited to strategies for encouraging the agricultural establishment to investigate and understand the agronomic potential of alternative systems. The formal policy agenda was quite narrow.

For all practical purposes, this limited policy goal was realized in 1980 with the publication of the USDA Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming. This cautiously optimistic report, which included a call for increased research and education, was greeted by the organic farming community with a mixture of surprise, delight, and relief. Expectations were high that there would be a

substantial follow-up to the report. After all, an official report by USDA on organic farming had been published, and surely now, this approach to farming would get the attention, priority, and respect it deserved.

But that was not to be. Reactions to the report in many quarters of the agricultural chemical industry, conventional farm press, commodity organizations, and the scientific and educational community, were quite negative - even scornful in some cases. Despite the USDA's cautious stamp of approval, organic farming continued to be viewed by most of conventional agriculture as a regressive, primitive, non-productive, and non-scientific return to the past. Within just a few months, the new Secretary of Agriculture would be quoted as saying that organic farming research was "a dead end." Indeed, it soon became painfully clear to the organic farming community that even an "official" USDA Report on organic farming simply would be unable to diminish or overcome the negative symbolism of organic agriculture within the agricultural establishment.

New Strategies

It was in this context of disappointment, dismay, and disillusionment that the search began for new terminology, new symbolism, and new language for advancing the organic farming agenda. It was about this time, for example, that Bob Rodale began to describe regenerative agriculture. Others began to talk of alternative agriculture. An article written by an organic farmer in New England observed that independent farming was an appropriate and descriptive term. Eliot Coleman, then the director of a small, private organic farming research station in Topsfield, Massachusetts, started a newsletter called "Sustainable Agriculture News." And in 1984, a small group of alternative agriculturists in Iowa, under the leadership of the well-known organic farmer, Richard Thompson, started a new farm organization called the Practical Farmers of Iowa.

For the most part, these developments represented deliberate efforts to find language and symbolism that would be more acceptable to the agricultural establishment and thus provide a better vehicle for advancing the organic farming agenda. This is how and when the transition to "sustainable agriculture" occurred.

To a remarkable degree, these strategies were successful. The new language of sustainable agriculture did help to foster a dialogue with the conventional agricultural community. It created a better climate for communication on the character and consequences of conventional agriculture, and the potential of alternative systems.

Certainly it spawned countless conferences, workshops, and symposia around the country - conferences, workshops, and symposia that might not have been possible without new terminology. Also, there are now many programs, institutes, and centers in our leading agricultural universities which bear the title of sustainable agriculture. Consequently, much good came from the introduction of the new symbolism of sustainable agriculture.

Unforeseen Consequences

While the conventional agricultural community had found it relatively easy to dismiss, and even heap scorn and ridicule upon organic farming, it could not and has not been able to dismiss or ignore the symbolism of sustainability. In a sense, the symbolism of sustainability turned the debate upside down. Organic-type technologies were no longer the preserve of organic gardeners. These were the technologies, it was now said, that could lead to a sustainable agriculture - a very powerful political and symbolic goal.

The conventional agricultural community was not prepared to let that happen. It was not willing to let the organic community lay sole claim to the mantle of sustainability. Thus, within just a few years, technologies such as best management practices, biotechnology, conservation tillage, and even corn/soybean rotations were being described as sustainable agriculture.

Let me relate two personal experiences that may help to illustrate the impact of this new symbolism. In the late 1980s, as I walked down a street in Washington, D.C., with the research leader from one of this country's largest chemical companies, this gentleman put his hand on my shoulder and said,

“Garth, isn’t it wonderful that we’re all together now.”

But then about a year later, after presenting a talk to the Washington Agricultural Roundtable, a very conventional organization, the President of the National Agricultural Chemicals Association said: “Garth, we’re with you 100 percent on sustainable - it’s the low-input part we can’t take.” These incidents convey an important message regarding the evolution of sustainable agriculture in the United States. As we prepared for the debate over the 1990 Farm Bill virtually all sectors of agriculture claimed to be sustainable. Not surprisingly, the Congress found the whole matter to be utterly confusing and divisive, a situation which remains largely unchanged to this day.

Let me give one or two examples of how confusion over the character and meaning of sustainable agriculture influenced the 1990 Farm Bill. Despite the size and complexity of that legislation, the definition of sustainable agriculture became one of the Bill’s most controversial issues. The debate was highly emotional and highly symbolic. In the end, failing to reach agreement, Congress resolved the issue by developing two definitions of sustainable agriculture. In Chapter 1 of Subtitle B, we find the call for low-input approaches. In Chapter 2 of the same Subtitle, we find the call simply for the more efficient use of chemicals.

Some have criticized Congress for being unable to arrive at a common definition and clear vision of sustainable agriculture. In reality, however, Congress is simply reflecting the multiplicity of views and definitions which exist within the broader agricultural community. Many of you have grown weary of debating definitions of sustainable agriculture. That is understandable. To an extent, I share the view that we should move beyond definitions and get on with the job of creating sustainable farming systems. But while we’re getting on with our agenda, I would only remind you that there are many other powerful constituencies and interests doing the very same thing under the very same banner of sustainability, but with quite different technological approaches.

Thus, from the standpoint of public policy, it becomes even more critical for us as a community to develop scientifically-derived and defensible indicators or criteria of sustainability. We can’t simply claim that organic-type technologies offer the only path to sustainability or even the best path. We must develop the criteria and operational definitions that we can defend empirically. It is beginning to happen in soil quality and in some other areas. But we have an equal obligation to develop such indicators in other areas, and then relate them to the viability of rural communities, rural health, social justice, and other issues.

The Clinton Administration

Finally, I’d like to discuss the emerging priorities of the Clinton Administration, which could be enormously important. It is a development that is going to affect significantly the calculus in the debate about the future of the sustainable agriculture agenda. The Congress, after all, is not well-designed as an institution to provide the kind of persistent and focused leadership needed to advance complex policy issues such as sustainable agriculture. One would expect that the Executive Branch of our government would provide the essential leadership on these issues. However, the historical lack of top-level administrative leadership in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and even in the White House has made it almost impossible to develop and sustain the focus needed to move this agricultural approach to its rightful level on the overall agricultural policy agenda.

I am hopeful that this Administration will provide the necessary leadership. There are several Clinton Administration appointees in USDA, the White House, and EPA who are sympathetic to the concept of sustainability. Many of these individuals are ideologically predisposed to advancing the sustainable agriculture agenda. EPA is becoming much more sensitive and knowledgeable on this issue and, presently at least, there is improved coordination between EPA and USDA, as well as with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). For example, in June 1993 the FDA with USDA and EPA issued an extraordinary statement about the National Academy of Sciences’ (NAS) Report on Pesticides in the Diets of Infants and Children. At that time, USDA Secretary Mike Espy, EPA Administrator Carol Browner, and FDA Commissioner David Kessler said: “We will intensify

our effort to reduce the use of high-risk pesticides and promote integrated pest management, including biological and cultural control systems and other sustainable agriculture practices under the leadership of the USDA. We will work side-by-side with American farmers to help test and implement improved and safer methods of pest management already used by many farmers.” Several days later, Administrator Browner added, “We’ll work with American farmers to promote alternative farming methods that don’t use any pesticides at all.” She later said, “EPA would monitor more closely pesticide residues on fruits and vegetables and gather more information on children’s eating habits.”

Re-Prioritizing the Agenda on Sustainable Agriculture

These were strong declarations, but there were many who viewed them with a high degree of skepticism. These skeptics wanted to see more specifics. On September 22, 1993 their desires were at least partially addressed, when USDA Deputy Secretary Richard Rominger, EPA Administrator Carol Browner, and FDA Commissioner David Kessler testified before a joint committee of Congress. I want to share with you three or four brief passages from this testimony in order to give you some sense of the flavor and tone of what I regard as a dramatic first step in re-prioritizing the U.S. policy agenda on sustainable agriculture and pesticide reform. Please note the strong theme throughout this testimony of the importance of developing pesticide regulations that take into account the effects of multiple exposures of pesticides on children. Direct quotations from their testimony follows:

“In establishing tolerances, the statutes should also direct EPA to look at the multiple sources of exposure to a pesticide, a recommendation that the NAS believes will be especially beneficial to infants and children.”

“The major goals of our FIFRA reforms are to better enable us to reduce or eliminate potential pesticide risks to health of the environment, to strengthen our efforts to reduce pesticide use, to encourage development of safer alternatives, and to provide a broader range of regulatory and enforcement authorities to improve compliance with pesticide regulations. The Administration’s proposals would not only improve food safety, they would also enhance our ability to deal with farm worker risks, groundwater contamination, hazards to endangered species, and exposure of children and others to pesticide use for lawn care and residential pest control that may in any way affect our daily lives and the environment. The Administration is committed to reducing pesticide risks and encouraging the development of safer alternative means of pest control, including non-chemical control alternatives”

“We are setting a goal of developing and implementing IPM programs for 75 percent of total crop acreage within the next seven years. We believe Congress should endorse this goal. Increased use of IPM is firmly grounded in an environmental ethic of pollution prevention, a keystone of Administration policy in all sectors including agriculture”

Recognizing the need to implement in the field our commitment to reduced pesticide use, we support the establishment of several pilot ecosystem-based, reduced-use programs tailored to specific regions and involving all stakeholders. These programs should focus on reducing aggregate pesticide risks. We also support the use of market-based incentives to help achieve environmental progress. This might include use of food label claims to encourage purchase of food with reduced use of pesticides”

“In keeping with the recommendations of the NAS, we plan to enlarge and improve the database on foods consumed by infants and children. We look forward to working with Congress to find the funding to increase USDA survey efforts in compiling consumption data especially for children. This information will help us to fulfill our objective of increasing our assurance that our children are protected from pesticide use”

“We are developing a comprehensive program of regulatory and non-regulatory efforts designed to reduce the risk of high-risk pesticides by reducing their use. Our goal is threefold. One, to discourage the use of high-risk products; two, to provide incentives for the development and commercialization of safe products; and three, to encourage the use of

alternative control methods which decrease the reliance on toxic and persistent chemicals. A successful program must involve the full efforts of federal and state, agencies, as well as the cooperation of the agricultural research community.”

Future Prospects

Now, please understand that I am not here this morning as a spokesman for this Administration. I am not part of this Administration. But I can read testimony, and I cannot help but be encouraged. At the same time, however, I fully realize that this Administration may not be able to stay the course on some of the goals it has established in this field. There will certainly be pressures to go slowly - pressures to delay or abandon some of these proposals. There will be counterproposals. There will be efforts to discredit and discount the relevance and efficacy of low-input, sustainable agriculture as an alternative as we look for new, better and safer ways to grow our food and fiber. There will also be resistance to these goals and initiatives by some key career administrators.

Having said this, however, I feel quite hopeful that this may be a unique moment to move the sustainable agriculture agenda forward - this time in harmony with the Administration, not in conflict with it. The Administration, I believe, is trying to create a new climate, new atmospherics, a new kind of political calculus for this debate. Consequently, in my judgment, if we can now effectively mobilize and present our ideas, information, and perspectives in a credible fashion, we have a major opportunity to elevate our policy agenda and our notions about sustainability to a new and significant level of acceptance, implementation, and ultimately, adoption on the farm.