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Farmers' Views on Conservation Funding and Iowa's Water and Land Legacy

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Farmers' Views on Conservation Funding and Iowa's Water and Land Legacy Amendment

Introduction

The Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll is an annual survey that collects and disseminates information on issues of importance to rural communities across Iowa and the Midwest. Conducted every year since its establishment in 1982, the Farm Poll is the longest-running survey of its kind in the nation. Iowa State University Extension, the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, and the Iowa Agricultural Statistics Service are all partners in the Farm Poll effort. The information gathered through the Farm Poll is used to inform the development and improvement of research and extension programs and is used by local, state, and national leaders in their decision-making processes. We thank the many farm families who responded to this year's survey and appreciate their continued participation in the Farm Poll. Copies of this or any other year's reports are available from your local county Extension office, the Extension Distribution Center (www.extension.iastate.edu/store), Extension Sociology (www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/farmpoll), or from the author.

Who Participates?

The 2010 Farm Poll questionnaires were mailed in January and February to a statewide panel of 2,224 farm operators. Usable surveys were received from 1,360 farmers, for a response rate of 61 percent. On average, Farm Poll participants were 64 years old. Most farm poll participants depend on farming for a sig-

nificant proportion of their overall household income. Forty-eight percent of participants reported that farm income made up more than half of their 2009 household income, and an additional 19 percent earned between 26 and 50 percent of their household income from the farm operation.

Iowa's Water and Land Legacy Amendment

On November 2, 2010, Iowans will have the opportunity to vote on an amendment to the Iowa constitution referred to as Iowa's Water and Land Legacy. This amendment would create a dedicated fund called the *Iowa Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund* that would be used to protect and enhance water quality, conserve agricultural soils, and establish, maintain and improve natural areas including parks, trails, and fish and wildlife habitat. The intent of the Trust Fund is to provide additional investment in agricultural conservation, wildlife habitat, and natural resources-based recreation opportunities. The 2010 Farm Poll contained a number of questions to gain an understanding of how farmers feel about the proposed amendment.

Questions focused on two related areas. The first centered on opinions regarding the *potential benefits* of increased public investment in conservation. The second area that was examined was *support for* increased funding for conservation and the trust fund initiative, specifically. This report presents the results for those questions.

Introduction to the Questions

It was anticipated that some farmers would not be familiar with the proposed constitutional amendment, therefore a short explanation of the amendment was provided to ensure that all participants would have a similar understanding of it. The following text preceded the questions:

In November 2010, Iowa citizens will be asked to vote on a proposed amendment to the Iowa constitution. The amendment, called Iowa's Water and Land Legacy, would establish a permanent and protected source of funding dedicated to protecting and enhancing water quality and natural areas in Iowa.

The funding source would be called the Iowa Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. The fund would address Iowa's natural resources needs in the following areas: soil and water conservation; fish, wildlife, and natural areas; parks and trails; and restoration of wetlands to help protect against future flooding. The constitutional amendment will stipulate that 3/8 of one percent of any future sales tax increase in Iowa be dedicated to natural resource conservation. The amendment itself will not raise taxes.

In Iowa, a constitutional amendment must be passed by two different General Assemblies of the state legislature before it can go to a vote of the people. The resolution that proposed the amendment to establish the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund has passed two General Assemblies, and will now be voted on by the people of Iowa in November.

The introductory text was followed by a series of statements designed to elicit opinions about the proposed Trust Fund and related issues. Farmers were asked to indicate the degree

to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Because it was anticipated that there would be some level of uncertainty on some of the items, an "uncertain" category was included as the middle point on the five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Results

Potential benefits

On the whole, farmers appear to view the Trust Fund and associated natural resource-based development activities as potentially beneficial for Iowa farmers and rural areas. The statement that received the strongest endorsement was, "In general, parks, trails, and other natural resources-related recreational opportunities provide economic benefits to rural areas." Fifty percent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, compared to 16 percent who disagreed (table 1). Forty-seven percent agreed that the establishment of a Trust Fund would be beneficial to farmers' soil and water conservation activities, while 14 percent disagreed. Substantial percentages of farmers agreed that increases in funding for soil and water conservation, fish, wildlife, and natural areas, and parks and trails would benefit Iowa farmers (43 percent) and rural areas more generally (42 percent). In contrast, only 21 percent of farmers disagreed with each of those statements.

A statement that specifically referenced the trust fund, "the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund would be good for rural Iowa," drew 35 percent agreement and 20 percent disagreement (table 1). Finally, an item proposing that improved natural resource-based recreation opportunities would help Iowa to retain young people garnered the least amount of agreement (24 percent) as well as the highest level of disagreement (24 percent).

The degree of uncertainty in responses to each of the six items was high. The percentage of farmers who selected the "uncertain" category

Table 1. Benefits-related statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
	—Percentage—				
In general, parks, trails, and other natural resources-related recreational opportunities provide economic benefits to rural areas.....	4	12	34	45	5
The Trust Fund would provide a needed increase in resources available to help farmers with soil and water conservation activities	4	10	39	40	7
Iowa farmers would benefit from increased funding for soil and water conservation, fish, wildlife, and natural areas, and parks and trails	6	15	36	35	8
Rural Iowa would benefit from increased funding for soil and water conservation, fish, wildlife, and natural areas, and parks and trails	6	15	37	36	6
The Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund would be good for rural Iowa.....	8	12	45	29	6
Improved natural resource-based recreation opportunities would help Iowa to retain its best and brightest young people.....	5	19	52	21	3

ranged from 34 percent for the statement on the potential economic benefits of recreational opportunities for rural areas to 52 percent for the item regarding retention of young people (table 1). The high levels of uncertainty indicate that many farmers were not familiar enough with the issues to provide an opinion, especially in relation to the Trust Fund.

Despite the high rates of uncertainty, the results show that most farmers who provided an opinion view increased funding for natural resource conservation as beneficial. If we focus only on those farmers who either agreed or disagreed with the statements, levels of agreement about potential benefits to farmers and rural areas far outweigh disagreement. Farmers who agreed that parks, trails, and other natural resources-related recreational opportunities are economically beneficial for rural areas outnumber those who disagreed by three to one. Likewise, farmers who agreed that the Trust fund would provide a necessary increase in funding to assist farmers with soil and water conservation work outnumbered those in disagreement by a ratio of 3.3 to one. Twice as many farmers agreed

with the rest of the statements (except for the item regarding population retention) as disagreed. Taken together, these results represent a positive assessment of the benefits that increased investment in agricultural conservation and development of natural resources for recreational purposes would bring to rural Iowa.

Support-related questions

While the statements discussed above focused on the *perceived benefits* of investments in conservation, three statements gauged farmers' *explicit support* for conservation funding in general and the trust fund in particular. Uncertainty was once again an issue, with the highest levels of uncertainty (42 percent) expressed on the amendment-specific question (table 2). This result—that more farmers are uncertain about the amendment than either support it or oppose it—suggests that many farmers are just not familiar enough with the initiative to offer their judgment.

Nevertheless, a majority of participants offered their opinion on each statement. Slightly more than half (51 percent) of farmers agreed

Table 2. Support-related questions

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
—Percentage—					
Iowa should dedicate additional public funding to programs to protect land, water, and wildlife	5	14	30	42	9
I am in favor of the constitutional amendment to establish a Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund	12	17	42	23	6
Iowa needs more parks, trails, and other natural resources-related recreational opportunities	8	24	36	27	5

that Iowa should provide more public funding for protection of land, water, and wildlife, compared to only 19 percent who disagreed (table 2). Levels of agreement and disagreement were about equal for the remaining two items. Support for the Trust Fund was evenly split: 29 percent agreed that they were in favor of the amendment, 29 percent disagreed, and the remaining 42 percent were uncertain. Thirty-six percent agreed that Iowa needs more natural resources-related recreational opportunities, and the same percentage disagreed.

Conclusion

The Iowa’s Water and Land Legacy amendment ballot question represents an important deci-

sion for Iowans. The Farm Poll data indicate that a significant proportion of farmers support increased investments in conservation. While uncertainty outweighed agreement or disagreement regarding the constitutional amendment, a majority of farmers believe that public funding for the protection and enhancement of Iowa’s land, water, and wildlife should be increased. This research also shows that in general, Iowa’s farmers view investment in conservation as an important contributor to rural development, and beneficial to both farmers and rural areas as a whole.

Prepared by J. Gordon Arbuckle, Jr., extension sociologist. Renea Miller provided valuable layout assistance to the questionnaire and this report. The Iowa Department of Land Stewardship, Division of Statistics, assisted in the data collection.

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