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Introduction

National rural policy in the United States has seen dramatic changes in recent decades. Demographic shifts from rural to urban areas have provided new policy challenges for rural areas, including slowed economic development, increasing consolidation in the agriculture sector (Fuglie et al., 2011), and decreased political power (Bonnen, 1992; Browne, 2001). Rural policy encompasses a number of different traditional policy domains, including agriculture, rural economic and community development, environment, energy, and food. Rapid technology change, speed and ease of communication, and availability of information necessitate timely delivery of policy-relevant science in all policy domains. Social scientists have been encouraged especially to focus on policy-relevant science to inform policy debates rather than simply to analyze policies retroactively (Wilson, 2002).

Research in policy studies has investigated many aspects of interest groups and public policy, including the role of interest groups, the agenda-setting role of the media, and policy formulation and implementation (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Grossman, 2012; Grossman and Dominguez, 2009; Weible et al., 2009). For scholars to contribute significantly to ongoing policy debates, they need to identify issues as they arise rather than react after the fact. This is especially true in the broad rural policy arena. The research presented here begins to explore rural policy issues of relevance in 2013, as well as provide a framework for using internet-based policy materials produced by rural advocacy groups. This discussion is also relevant to analysts, advocates, and policy makers who wish to understand and engage in policy debates.

Most of the research on advocacy coalitions and interest group networks has focused on what influences group participation in networks, how coalitions gain influence, and the dynamics of these networks over time (Weible et al., 2009). Less attention has been paid to the specific policies being advocated, or how groups frame policy issues. Some research has addressed the role of focusing events, which are typically dramatic and widely-publicized events that garner considerable public attention on a particular issue (Birkland, 1998). Most federal policy, however, is made without these sorts of focusing events, during what might be described as normal conditions. In rural policy, the primary legislation occurs in the “farm bill,” which encompasses not only agricultural programs, but also conservation, rural development, local and regional food systems, and nutrition programs. The farm bill is passed by Congress every four to five years. In this sense rural policy is addressed at regular intervals by Congress,

providing a known schedule in which interest groups operate. More broadly, rural policy is affected by a number of federal policies beyond the farm bill, including healthcare, tax and economic policy, food safety (which is primarily handled by the Food and Drug Administration, or FDA), and education. Focusing events can be important in rural policy as well, including spikes in food or energy prices or food safety crises. For researchers to be able to provide timely scholarship for policy debates, it is necessary to understand issues that emerge from both focusing events as well as the natural evolution of policy concerns in the absence of clear focusing events.

Networks and coalitions of interests play a major role in the U.S. policy process by identifying and framing issues, as well as advocating for specific policy solutions. Interest groups can also play a role in implementation of policies through participation in agency rulemaking and judicial actions to block or force agency action. While the structure and functions of interest groups have been extensively researched, the issues that they advocate for have received less attention, especially in the broad domain of rural policy. Interest groups then provide an opportunity for researchers to identify issues as they emerge, allowing policy communities and researchers to provide timely information to policy debates. The field of rural policy in particular is in need of such attention as demographic shifts potentially limit focus on the needs of rural communities. While the agricultural sector has traditionally received such attention, the broader concerns of rural communities have not.

Approach

The research presented here utilized a qualitative content analysis method to identify current rural policy issues. Content analysis approaches, both qualitative and quantitative, have been used to assess a variety of related phenomena including policy positions (Laver and Garry, 2000), interest group influence (Kluver, 2009), and policy framing (Lenihan and Brasier, 2010). With the Internet, interest groups have increasingly turned to the web for presenting their agendas and attempting to influence the policy process (Bimber, 1998; DiMaggio et al., 2001; Suarez, 2009). Much of the research on interest groups and the internet have focused on access and prevalence rather than what messages are being distributed (Obar et al., 2012). Also lacking are policy issue-specific analyses of Internet-based content. I am not aware of a content analysis approach used with Internet-based policy content, especially in the rural policy arena.

In the first stage of the content analysis, I used multiple methods to identify interest groups engaged in national rural policy, including news media, key informant interviews, and congressional testimony (see Reimer 2013 for a full description of methods). I identified a total of 123 interest groups representing a wide range of organizations and interests, including agricultural commodity groups, farmer groups, environmental advocacy organizations, sportmen's groups, and rural industry associations. Among the most influential organizations as identified by key informants was the American Farm Bureau Federation, major farm commodity organizations such as the National Corn Growers Association and American Soybean Association, the National Association of Counties, the Environmental Defense Fund, Ducks Unlimited, and the Center for Rural Affairs.

After identifying rural advocacy organizations, I qualitatively analyzed Internet-based policy content¹. Policy content takes a variety of forms on the Internet, and often is not explicitly presented as policy-specific. Organizations express policy positions in a number of ways, including through policy agendas, platforms, and issue briefs. A number of organizations also rely heavily on press releases to raise and frame issues. Some groups, especially those most focused on advocacy, produce action alerts that individuals can sign up to receive. Many of these action alerts are paired with pleas to contact legislators in traditional or e-mail letter-writing campaigns. A few organizations produce lengthier studies or other documents outlining issues in detail, though this is typically only done by the largest organizations, especially environmental groups. I downloaded issue-related content from organization websites. I initially categorized policy issues in the four main policy domains (agriculture, rural development, environment, and food) in each document.

Current Rural Policy Issues

The material revealed a range of issues across the different policy domains, some dealing primarily with federal legislation being debated in 2012 and some identifying issues that may gain federal attention in 2013. Below I outline each issue theme, describing the major legislative or policy issues in play and identifying some of the groups active in the issue area. In particular I focus on the areas of active debate

¹ I used an open coding scheme to identify the emergent issue themes within each domain category. Finally, I used an axial coding strategy to make connections between issues. This last step was necessary given the differences in frames used by groups with opposing policy views. For example, an agricultural commodity organization might frame certain environmental policies as burdensome regulation, while an environmental organization would frame the same policy issue as a necessary protection for a given natural resource.

at the end of 2012 and discuss aspects of each issue that are likely to be most significant in 2013. The major policy issues roughly group into the four focus domains, although there was overlap or connection between issues. Figure 1 shows the major issues identified through the content analysis and some of the connections between issues. In addition, Figure 1 shows the relative importance given each issue by the policy community. In many cases, statements by groups indicated what the most important issues were. For example, an organization might comment on a variety of issues but state that one issue in particular was the most important. The amount of information about a given topic was also an indicator of how important that issue was to the organization. The most important issues often had multiple policy documents or lengthier commentaries.

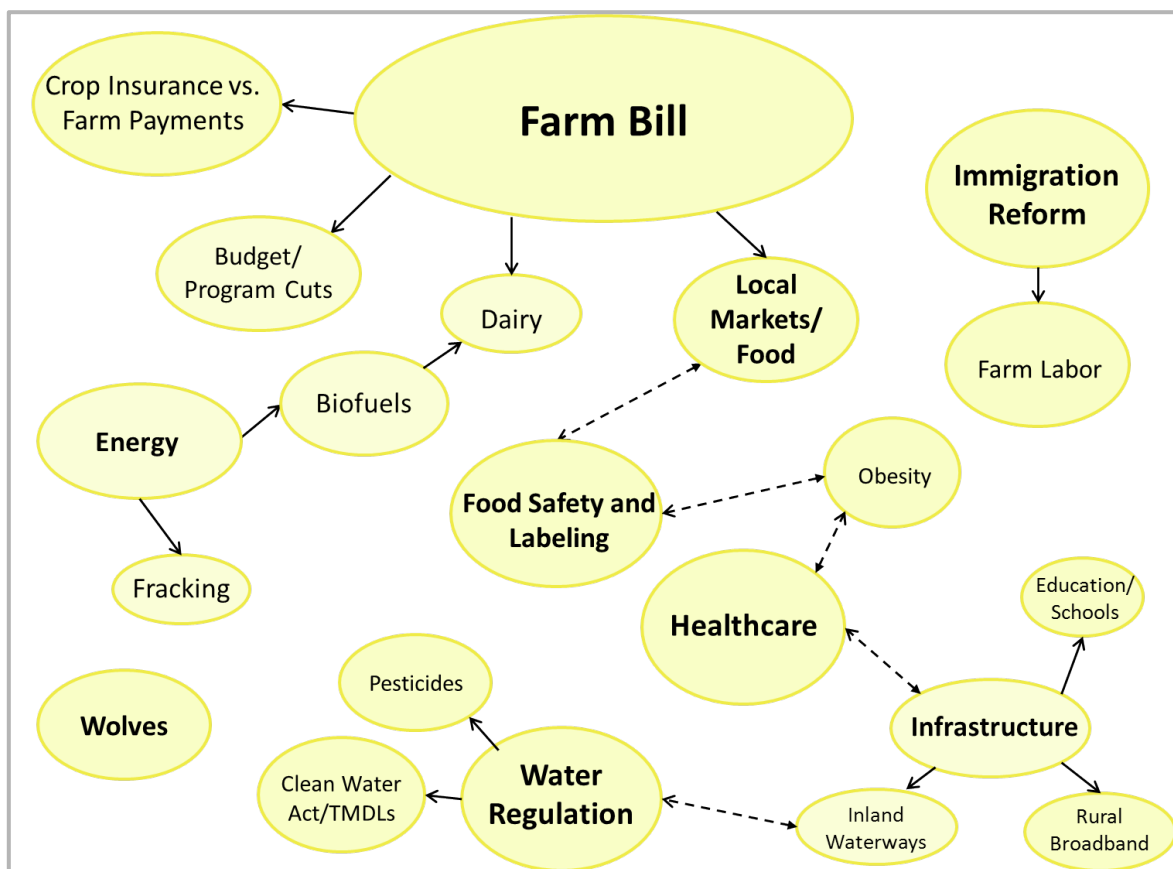


Figure 1. Current rural issue themes identified through analysis of policy content produced by rural interest groups. The circle and text sizes roughly correspond to the relative importance given to the issue by the interest community.

Farm Bill

The failure of Congress to pass a new farm bill in 2012 resulted in a scramble to pass a nine-month extension of farm programs before the 112th Congress adjourned. Both houses of Congress will resume

debate of a five year farm bill in 2013. Many rural interest groups focused on promoting a five year farm bill in 2012, though not necessarily with agreement on all policy issues within the bill. As outlined above, the farm bill funds a wide variety of programs across the entire broad rural policy arena. Groups tended to focus their policy attention on programs and aspects of the farm bill that are within the specific arena in which they operate, such as farm programs for agricultural organizations and nutrition programs for food advocacy groups.

The Senate farm bill and House agriculture committee bill shared similarities in terms of programs, including a shift in farm programs from farm payments to crop insurance, some shifts in conservation programs, and reductions to nutrition programs. Positions on these changes varied among groups, though most of the shifts are generally supported by major agricultural groups. A number of groups, including the AFBF, National Corn Growers Association, and American Soybean Association, supported the shift in farm program approach from payments, including direct and countercyclical payments, to crop insurance support. Some southern commodity groups, including the USA Rice Federation and National Cotton Council, opposed elimination of payment programs, leading to some differences between the Senate and House bills (and contributing to the failure to pass the bill). This is an area of debate as the farm bill process extends into 2013.

Another area of debate is over farm disaster relief programs. The national drought in 2012 hit some farm sectors hard, including livestock and dairy. Uncertain weather conditions in 2013, including the potential for extended drought conditions, may lead to particular attention on disaster and insurance programs. Several disaster relief programs ran out of funding in 2011 and did not receive appropriations for 2012 or 2013. These programs are especially focused on covering livestock, tree and fruit crop, and vegetable producers' losses. A number of groups produced position documents on these policies in 2012, and some in the livestock arena have called for a protection program similar to crop insurance for their sector.

The dairy program is also actively debated. This program is complex and has changed a number of times in recent decades. The last farm bill, passed in 2008, included a program call the Milk Income Loss Contract, which provides dairy producers with payments when milk prices fall below a certain level. The Senate and House bills in 2012 attempted to change this to a program that ties support to feed prices. Dairy producer groups generally supported this proposal, while it was opposed by dairy processors

(Schnepf, 2012). The Senate attempted to include this change in the farm bill extension but in the end the 2008 programs were extended. The dairy sector is likely to continue to be debated in the 2013 farm bill debate.

Farm bill appropriations are also an area of uncertainty, with continued political pressure to reduce spending. Nearly 80% of farm bill money goes to nutrition programs, making them a prime target of budget cuts, though other areas also saw cuts in the 2012 bills, including conservation, beginning farmer, and rural development programs. Farm, commodity, environmental, and rural development organizations recognized the political push for budget cuts in policy statements produced at the end of 2012. Understandably, groups all tended to argue for maximizing appropriations that most benefit their constituencies. In the 2012 bills, the House cuts were steeper, with nearly four times the money cut from nutrition programs over ten years compared with the Senate bill. Conservation programs also took a steep cut. Much of the savings came from ending farm payment programs, though this was balanced by increasing spending on the crop insurance system. As the farm bill continues to be debated into 2013, several groups believe that cuts to programs will be at least as great as those proposed in 2012, if not larger.

Immigration and Farm Labor Reform

Following the national election in November, immigration reform received considerable attention. Changing national election demographics led to increased emphasis on reforming federal immigration policies, especially with respect to immigration from Latin America. Several farm groups, notably AFBF, expressed concern over the availability of agricultural labor, with attention on ongoing labor shortages. These groups were supportive of reform to the temporary agricultural worker program, known as H-2A. There were congressional hearings in 2011 and 2012 about the labor shortage as well, with groups such as AFBF and the United Farm Workers of America testifying.

Following the election and news coverage given to immigration reform, agricultural groups moved quickly to join the national debate. A number of groups joined to form the Agricultural Workforce Coalition, primarily representing agricultural employers, including AFBF, United Fresh Produce Association, Western Growers, and the National Council of Agricultural Employers. As part of a larger national push for comprehensive immigration reform, groups including the Agricultural Workforce Coalition and the United Farm Workers of America will continue to stress reform of agricultural labor

programs. It is notable that the immigration issue affects other aspects of rural policy beyond agricultural labor. Immigrant communities within rural America are growing as well, and groups such as the United Farm Workers are pushing reform to citizenship policies. Government associations such as NACo are also supportive of immigration reform, particularly proposals that ease the burden of illegal immigration on local governments.

Transportation and Rural Infrastructure

The 2012 drought resulted in substantial declines in water levels in major U.S. rivers, most notably the Mississippi River. Many farm organizations expressed concern for the condition of waterway transportation, with congressional hearings on the subject in late 2011 and 2012. Near record low water levels in the Mississippi in December and January led to increased attention to the topic by national news media, offering an opportunity for groups such as AFBF to emphasize the need for increased federal investment. Agricultural interests proposed some specific actions, including emergency actions by the Army Corps of Engineers to raise water levels, an increase in the fuel tax rate paid by barge operators that partially funds the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, and reform of the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund to allow more spending on dredging activities. Water levels in transportation waterways in 2013 may continue to make this an issue, particularly if drought conditions continue through the summer.

Other aspects of rural infrastructure received attention from interest groups in 2012, including education and broadband. (Health infrastructure was also discussed actively but is covered in a separate section below). Among the most critical issues in education included federal funds from U.S. Forest Service lands that are returned to states for funding of rural school districts. The enacting legislation, the Secure Rural Schools Act (SRSA), was reauthorized in 2012 with some changes, including where within the state and to what activities the money can be allocated. A range of rural interests, including the AFBF and NADo, supported the SRSA. The program will need to be reauthorized in 2013, indicating that this issue will remain on the policy agenda of these groups. Rural broadband also received considerable attention in 2012, with many groups representing rural constituencies and businesses supporting expansion and improvement of broadband service in rural areas. Several groups, including the Center for Rural Affairs, promoted broadband expansion as an economic and community development policy mechanism. Rural constituent groups especially supported one key aspect of broadband development, the Universal Service Fund (USF). Congress created the USF to support universal access to

telecommunications service and is funded by fees from providers. The fund in turn finances several programs aimed at providing service to poor and minority communities, schools, and rural hospitals. Interest groups supported this mechanism as a way to federally provide broadband Internet to key rural services. Telecommunications companies have sought substantial changes or an end to the USF, prompting debate about the future of policy in this area. It is likely that issues of broadband development, especially in underserved areas that include much of rural America, will be actively debated in 2013.

Water Policy and Environmental Regulation

The water policy arena, especially pollution policy, was the most noteworthy area of difference in framing used by various groups. Potential water policies include: 1) requiring National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits for aquatic application of pesticides; 2) change in Clean Water Act language from “navigable waters of the U.S.” to “waters of the U.S.”, which could be used to expand EPA authority over water pollution; and 3) Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) processes for multi-state waterbodies, including the Chesapeake Bay and Mississippi River basins, which could place regulatory emissions limits on agriculture. A number of agricultural groups have raised concerns about these changes to water pollution policy, framing them as burdensome regulation. From this perspective, changes that might affect farmers are seen as unnecessary and overly damaging to the agricultural sector. For example, pesticide applicators are currently regulated under a different law, the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA), which requires licensing and training for applicators and compliance with all pesticide labels. In this sense pesticide applications, including those near water, are already subject to regulation. Farm groups, including AFBF, argue that regulating aquatic applications under the Clean Water Act would be unnecessary and burdensome.

On the other side, environmental groups argue that current regulations do not go far enough to protect water quality nationally. A number of environmental groups support of the TMDL process in the Chesapeake watershed, though no groups mentioned the potential for a similar process in the Mississippi River. Environmental groups did not raise any of the other specific regulatory concerns of the agricultural groups, although they did indirectly reference a few. For example, the sportsman’s group Ducks Unlimited promotes the protection of “isolated” wetlands, which are not specifically part of the navigable waters of the U.S. This organization does not necessarily promote the direct regulation of water pollution or the change in Clean Water Act language, but rather supports federal, state, and

private actions to protect wetlands and water quality. In terms of water issues, environmental groups devoted much of their attention on ensuring full appropriations of environmental programs, including agri-environmental programs. Many farm groups also supported voluntary, payment-based environmental approaches.

Wolves

Despite once being nearly eliminated from the continental US, wolves have once again attracted attention in parts of rural America. After being reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in 1995, wolf populations in the Rocky Mountains grew rapidly, culminating in the removal of the western gray wolf from the Endangered Species List in 2012. Wolf populations naturally recovered in the western Great Lakes region (Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan) during the 1990s and 2000s as well; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service delisted this population in 2011. Removal of federal protection returned management of these wolf populations to states, including Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. In late 2012 and early 2013, state resource agencies proposed a range of management strategies, including the possibility of implementing managed wolf hunts.

Wolves have continued to be controversial among many rural residents and sportsmen's groups, who see unmanaged wolf populations as a threat to game species populations. Agricultural groups also express concern about growing wolf populations and especially their impact on livestock. A number of western and Great Lakes states have implemented programs that reimburse farmers and ranchers for predator-related losses, including states such as Washington where wolves are still federally protected. Animal rights and conservation groups devoted much of their attention at the state level, fighting proposed wolf hunts in Wyoming and Michigan. Delisting of the wolves triggered substantial concern at the national level from environmental groups as well. Several entities, including the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council, filed lawsuits in late 2012 to have wolves relisted. The wolf issue may primarily remain at the state level in the near term, although it is likely to continue to receive national attention from environmental, sportsmen's, and agricultural groups as wolf populations continue to grow and wolves expand into other states, including California.

Energy

A number of energy-related policy issues continued to garner federal attention in 2012, including biofuels, renewables, and energy extraction, especially natural gas hydraulic fracturing (also known as

fracking). Federal support of biofuels such as ethanol and biodiesel were largely supported by agricultural groups representing crop producers but opposed by livestock and dairy organizations. The opposition from animal agriculture mainly stems from impacts of biofuel production on crop and feed prices, which have continued to rise in recent years. High feed prices create concerns among dairy groups especially that continued support for biofuels will force some producers out of the market in coming years. This came to national attention at the end of 2012, as the combination of the expiring federal dairy program and high feed prices threatened to considerably raise the price of milk and other dairy products (dubbed the “dairy cliff” in the media). This particular problem was averted with the extension of the 2008 farm bill, but the intersection of energy and agricultural policy in biofuels will continue to divide agricultural groups. The primary biofuels policy that is likely to receive attention in 2013 is the Renewable Fuels Standard, which is set each year by the EPA. Supported by many agricultural groups, the standard has been criticized by environmental groups (among them the Environmental Working Group), national conservative and market-oriented groups, and fossil fuel interests (such as the American Petroleum Institute).

Fossil fuel extraction was an important issue in 2012, with increasing public attention on the potential negative environmental and social impacts and the notable positive economic impacts of natural gas extraction. Parts of Appalachia and the Great Plains have had rapid growth in extraction activity in recent years and projections have been for growth in new wells across the country. A number of agricultural groups support increased exploration and extraction of petroleum and gas, in part because farmers are sensitive to increases in prices of fuel and other inputs that rely on fossil fuels. Beyond general support for exploitation of domestic fossil fuels, agricultural interests typically did not weigh in on the issue of gas extraction directly. National environmental groups were very active on this issue, with the Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense Council all opposed to expansion of the practice. Environmental groups scrutinized the impacts of natural gas extraction on water and land resources, claiming that the practice is highly unsafe and should not be promoted.

The most important fossil fuel-related issue for environmental groups in late 2012 and early 2013 was the proposed Keystone XL pipeline. This proposed pipeline would transport petroleum extracted from deposits (known as tar sands oil) in western Canada to processing facilities in the Gulf Coast region. Despite Canadian control over mining decisions, U.S. based environmental groups still took a serious interest in this issue. Some groups expressed concerns about safety issues with the pipeline itself,

including the potential for spills or leaks. The main concerns however were about impacts on the Canadian environment and global climate change. According to environmental groups, the oil from tar sands (also known as oil or bituminous sands) requires more energy to extract, making it a less efficient form of energy. Extraction in oil sands areas also has a larger potential environmental impact, more akin to open pit or strip mining than oil drilling. The pipeline was first proposed as an extension of an existing pipeline in 2008 and as of the end of 2012 was not yet approved. To move forward, the pipeline requires federal approval, which the Obama administration has been reluctant to provide. There has also been resistance to the part of the pipeline crossing rural Nebraska, with concerns about impacts on the Ogallala aquifer. Other rural groups have not actively commented on this issue the way environmental groups have, but the pipeline approval question will continue to play out in 2013.

Rural Healthcare

Rural healthcare was among the most important rural development themes in 2012. As provisions of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) come into force, some attention was given to impacts on the rural health system, particularly by national health organizations and groups representing health providers. While the ACA includes changes to the private and employment-based insurance system, it also provides funding incentives to states, local governments, and healthcare providers. These programs are primarily aimed at improving health outcomes and streamlining delivery systems. These provisions could potentially be a boon to rural providers, who often struggle to meet the needs of local communities according to groups including the American Medical Association and NACo.

Additionally, the “fiscal cliff” situation at the end of 2012 affected a number of federal funding mechanisms. These garnered some attention from groups including NACo, which focused primarily on potential impacts on local governments. The healthcare changes include: a delay to the schedule of physician reimbursement rate under Medicare (the so-called “doc fix”); cuts to payments to hospitals with a disproportionate share of Medicaid patients; cuts to several smaller Medicare reimbursement programs. Several programs slated to expire in 2013 were extended for one year, including: the Medicare-Dependent Hospital (MDH) and Low Volume Hospital (LVH) programs, which help small and rural hospitals cover costs of treating Medicare patients; Medicare reimbursement for ambulance service in super-rural areas; the Transitional Medical Assistance Program, which provides medical coverage for families who lose Medicaid eligibility due to increased income; and the Qualified Individual program, which helps coordinate benefits for “dual-eligibles,” individuals who qualify for both Medicare

and Medicaid. While some of these fixes are not explicitly rural, a number of them impact rural communities. The MDH and LVH programs targeting hospitals are particularly important to the rural health system, as many rural hospitals depend on these programs to help cover the costs of treating an aging rural population. The one-year fix for all of these programs mean that they will continue to be a focus of attention in 2013.

Food Safety, Labeling, and Nutrition

At the beginning of 2013, the FDA released two new proposed rules on food regulations. One would implement prevent controls on many food processing facilities and require written plans that identify and address potential foodborne illness threats. The other rule would establish standards for fruit and vegetable producers that are intended to reduce potential for microbial contamination in fresh produce. Several notable foodborne illness outbreaks in 2012 drew media and interest group attention, including *Salmonella* outbreaks in melons, ground beef, spinach, and tuna. Agricultural groups called for active cooperation between producers and government agencies in implementing food safety regulations. It does not appear that this will be an area of active legislation in the coming year, but as new rules are implemented there is the potential for increased attention from interest groups or food and health activists.

In addition to attention on food safety, labeling generated interest from a wide range of groups in 2012. From the producer perspective, groups tend to oppose additional labeling requirements, including labeling of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The GMO issue gained exposure with a ballot measure in California (Proposition 37), which failed to pass but would have required labeling of food products containing GMOs. Producer and farm groups nearly all opposed the measure, arguing that GMOs are an important part of the U.S. food system and that labeling would create misperceptions about the safety of such products among the public. Food activists counter that GMO safety has not been thoroughly investigated and that the potential exists for long-term health risks. Activist groups, including the Center for Science in the Public Interest, continue to press for labeling requirements and improved screening of GMO crops before approving new varieties.

In addition to GMOs, other food labeling and nutrition concerns were raised in 2012 and continue to be a policy focus in 2013. New York City's action on size restrictions for sugared beverage serving size in September 2012 increased the public awareness of soda as a nutrition issue. Food groups have

continued to point to soda as a major contributor to obesity, especially in children. Suggested policy solutions include actions to reduce serving size (similar to New York's approach), restrictions on advertising aimed at children, and imposing taxes. There has been a profusion of sugared beverages on the market in the U.S. in recent years, including sports drinks, energy drinks, and flavored waters. According to some food groups, these products often make fraudulent health claims and should be more carefully regulated. Some groups have broadened the target of concern from sugared beverages to all processed foods with added sugars. One notable activist garnering media attention in early 2013 was Dr. Robert Lustig, a pediatric endocrinologist who has attempted to raise concern over increasing average U.S. sugar consumption. According to Lustig, most of the sugar consumed by Americans is added to processed foods and people are unaware of how much they are consuming. Lustig has called for new labeling requirements that would highlight the amount of added sugar in products in a more visible and cautionary way than is currently required. Attention on sugar as a nutrition concern is likely to continue to grow over the coming year.

Local and Regional Food Systems

A number of groups continued to emphasize the development of local and regional food systems to complement the national (and increasingly international) food system. The rapid growth of farmers markets, community supported agriculture, and farm-to-school programs across the country have largely been supported by agricultural interests, although to different extents by different groups. Commodity and trade groups less vocally supported local food systems, with fewer briefings and issue statements on the topic. The most active supporters of federal funding and support for local food systems included the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and some farm groups, including National Farmers Union and American Farmland Trust. These groups promoted federal action to support local food systems, including arguing for increased funding for existing USDA programs. These programs include: Farm to School Competitive Grants; Value-Added Producer Grants Program; Farmers Market Promotion Program, a competitive grant program that supports local food markets; and an information clearinghouse initiative known as Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food. One of these programs, the Value-Added Producer Grants, had its funding cut in the fiscal cliff deal, leaving the program unfunded for 2013. The NSAC helped draft comprehensive legislation designed to bolster federal support for local agriculture. Called the Local Farms, Food, and Jobs Act, this bill would help coordinate USDA programs, including farmer loan and marketing, nutrition, and commodity programs, to increase farmer access to

local food systems. While the entire bill was not incorporated into the 2012 versions of the Farm Bill, some provisions were, including a larger farmer's market promotion program.

Summary and Conclusions

The outlook for rural policy issues on the federal level in 2013 revolves around the farm bill. As the major piece of legislation affecting agriculture, bioenergy, rural conservation, rural development, and food, the farm bill attracted attention from a wide range of rural interest groups in 2012. The continuing pressure to find budget cuts makes it likely that a number of program areas will see reduced funding in whatever Farm Bill Congress ultimately passes. Many within the agricultural community supported the proposed changes to farmer payment and risk management programs, but the exact form of these changes remains uncertain. While much of the attention of interest groups is on favored programs in the farm bill, other issues will also develop in Washington over the next year. The most important of these is likely to be immigration reform, which appears to be a key policy debate in which Congress and the Obama administration will engage in coming months. Immigration reform impacts rural America in a number of ways, including agricultural labor and rural communities, many of which are increasingly composed of immigrants. Environmental and agricultural market impacts of energy will continue to be a source of contentious debate among various energy, agricultural, and environmental groups, although substantial changes to U.S. energy policy seems unlikely.

One key finding of this research is the lack of clear demarcations between policy domains. Within the larger field of rural policy, this research began with four predetermined policy arenas, including agriculture, rural development, environment, and food. Most issue themes identified in this analysis did not clearly fit within a single category. Even issues that on the surface might appear to be clearly within one domain, such as increasing cost pressure on the dairy sector, are directly related to another (energy). Food and agriculture are virtually inextricable policy areas, though they can be approached from either the producer or consumer perspectives. Local food systems are promoted by some as a powerful rural economic development mechanism. Energy issues can be viewed as part of environmental or rural development domains (though environmental quality and economic development are far from direct tradeoffs). The reality of policy complexity highlights the need to look at policy domains holistically and broadly to fully understand the policy process. Focusing on a single

aspect of rural policy, such as agriculture, potentially excludes important factors that impact development of complex policies such as those contained in the farm bill.

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