

Great Lakes Regional Meeting Follow-up Questions

Dennis Keeney, Senior Fellow
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

November 1, 2002

Non-point Source Pollution Panel

Question 1.

- a. How can we effectively leverage the authorities and expertise of each Federal and State agency, while considering local environmental conditions and political context to create the best possible solution for each watershed?

The key here is local. For several decades, government agencies including extension have met budget demands in part by cutting back on local personnel and technical assistance. Instead this is turned over to private companies, consultants, and in some cases non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The problem comes in getting unbiased recommendations from these groups. There is need for certification of operatives and training. In some cases, the Certified Crop Advisors fill this void.

Watershed planning is called for. Targeting of programs and assistance is critical. And financial matching of funds will help. It is not easy to form and hold together a typical watershed coalition. There are many geographical and political boundaries, as well as the rural-urban split to deal with. So help in coalition building should be included in federal and state programs. Yet this brings top down problems, so the watersheds should be relatively small.

- b. Are there watershed restoration or ecosystem management strategies for the Great Lakes region? If so, how are they working and what has been the Federal role?

It would take a lot of research to provide a quantitative answer to this question. Last week I participated in a meeting called Waters of Wisconsin (WOW), a 2-day gathering that included many NGOs and State and Federal agency workers. I came away convinced that a lot of people are worried about the Great Lakes, but that there are many small-uncoordinated efforts out there. This is the nature of NGOs, that they seldom work together. But each has great expertise. I was most impressed with the UWM Water Institute, which has something called Great Lakes Future, Inc. They can be reached at 600 E. Greenfield Ave, Milwaukee WI 53204, 414-382-1700. I would hope they could provide some idea of how many groups are involved in management strategies, how they are working together, and the Federal Role, especially since the Water Institute likely has federal funding. There are probably many other organizations out there with this type of information.

2. At the Chicago regional meeting, you mentioned that funding is a little misdirected in the farm bill and that this needs to be looked at. Please provide more information regarding this.

The 2002 farm bill is an incredibly complicated piece of legislation with something for almost everyone. But it could have problems with continued funding given the state of the national economy, and the nations priorities regarding defense.

The politics of family farms, land values, export markets, concentrated animal feeding operations, etc dictate that subsidies be largely directed to grain production, primarily corn and soybean, in the upper Mississippi River Basin. Some say this promotes even more production and fertilizer use. I do not doubt that occurs. But farming is a strange occupation. It is the only one that does not respond to low prices by cutting back on production. And if price supports are dropped or drastically lowered, land values will fall, creating a fiscal crisis in agriculture. We are actually hooked on these programs. Yet they assure that the Midwest landscape will remain dominated by row crops, and that nitrogen will leak from these lands. Little known is that many of the funding mechanisms for commodity support are now established and do not have to be voted on by Congress yearly. I look at this as a social security-medicare-medicade program for agriculture, inequitable, not enough but too much, misdirected, and the money largely captured by others.

The easy solution is to put more money into resource management. But it takes more than money to address such a large problem. The farm bill needs to put resources in to technical support, something it now ignores, so that people on the land can get proper information to put resource-conserving processes on the land.

The farm bill has a section for grants to community groups, watershed associations, etc. for environmental enhancement. This program probably will get under way soon, and offers a great opportunity for local decision- making backed by real money. Let's hope it works

While the resource management programs in the 2002 farm bill are excellent, they do little to address nitrogen problems. The farm bill should establish a task force to recommend acceptable ways to fix non point source nitrogen issues and find ways to implement these approaches.

The farm bill also should direct far more resources to rural community support and development. The human cost of the depopulation of the countryside is great. There needs to be creative ways to get people back on the land and stop the formation of 10,000+ acre farms. This can include niche markets, new crops, and new markets. We simply need more eyes to the acre to help control NPS pollution.

I was most impressed with the commission members and your goals during the hearings in Chicago. I hope you can continue to make a difference and look forward to the final report. If you have questions on this response, feel free to contact me.

Dennis Keeney