Research

Views from the Field: Exploring Producer Perceptions of Costs, Concerns, and Farm Policy

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Introduction

Agricultural producers in the United States face escalating financial strain as input costs increase, creating significant strain on farm-level viability (Farm Credit East, 2023). When financial margins tighten, producers are more attentive towards policy mechanisms that directly affect profitability, often positioning farm bill provisions as a critical component in operational decision making (Shields, 2010). These economic pressures shape producer attitudes towards farm bill policy, as profitability-driven producers favor price support mechanisms while environmentally oriented producers favor conservation-focused payment structures (Reimer & Prokopy, 2014; Schaub et al., 2023). Yet producers who support specific provisions do not always translate that support into program participation. Program complexity and administrative burden further serve as persistent barriers to enrollment, leading producers to favor initiatives that offer low complexity and flexibility (Prokopy et al., 2019; Sweikert & Gigliotti, 2019). How producers gather and evaluate information about these programs is central to understanding their attitudes and enrollment. When navigating policy decisions, rural producers are most receptive to information delivered through sources they perceive as credible and personally relevant, ranging from personal networks to institutional organizations (High et al., 2026; Maul et al., 2021). Building on these relationships, the purpose of this study is to examine how rural producers in West Texas perceive rising input costs and operational pressures, assess support for farm bill provisions, and identify the trusted sources they rely on when navigating policy-related decisions. The research was guided by the research objective: To examine farmers' and ranchers' agricultural decision-making perceptions and policy attitudes in rural West Texas.

Theoretical Framework

This study used the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) as a conceptual lens to examine how agricultural producers' perceptions are shaped by the interaction of financial, social, human, natural, and political capital (Flora, 2018) rather than by economic concerns alone. Applying the CCF frames producer perceptions because of interconnected forms of capital, capturing the intersection of economic pressures, policy environments, resource sustainability, and information networks that influence perceptions and decision-making processes (Pigg et al., 2013). The CCF has previously been applied to examine how forms of capital shape rural producer perceptions and inform policy interventions (Lamm et al., 2022).

Methods

As part of a larger research initiative, a quantitative survey was developed by researchers to obtain perceptions of the current state of agricultural operations from rural farmers and ranchers residing in a 41-county area in the West Texas Panhandle. Researchers attended community events throughout the area over a course of two years and asked event attendees to participate in a survey. Participants were invited to self-identify as farmers, ranchers, or friends of agriculture, and to indicate the types of crops or animals they raised (if they chose farmer or rancher). From there, general questions about input costs, operational concerns, farm bill policy support, and trusted sources of information were asked. Upon completion of the survey, participants were provided branded merchandise from the research initiative. Researchers analyzed survey responses using descriptive statistics in SPSS.

Results

A total of ($N = 66$) farmers and ranchers completed the survey. Results indicated substantial financial pressure on agricultural producers over the last decade, with a reported mean increase of 58.7% in operating expenses ($n = 46$, SD = 26.3). Regarding future operational concerns, producers most frequently identified water ($n = 38$, 58%), input costs ($n = 35$, 53%), farm bill policies (n =29, 44%), labor ($n = 22$, 33%), and weed control ($n = 21$, 32%). When asked about support of existing farm bill programs, participants indicated that research and education programs (71%), farm income (62%), conservation programs (62%), ag trade promotion and development (60%), and rural development (58%) were the programs they supported the most. Conversely, participants ranked plant and animal health protection (52%), specialty crop programs (42%), targeted producers (veterans, underserved, etc.) programs (42%), domestic food assistance (36%), and international food assistance (23%) as lest supported items. When asked where they obtained trusted information related to their operations, participants reported that extension ($n = 18$, 35%), ag supplier ($n = 13$, 26%), and RFD-TV ($n = 8$, 16%) were the three most reported information sources. Together, these findings suggest that rural agricultural producers are facing significant operational pressures while maintaining general support for federal farm policies and relying on local and industry-based sources for information.

Conclusions/Implications

This study examined producer perceptions, decision-making, and the intersections of financial, natural, social, human, and political capital (Flora, 2018; Pigg et al., 2013). Producers reported a nearly 59% increase in operating expenses over the past decade, with water availability, input costs, and farm bill policies identified as their primary concerns, reflecting pressures across financial, political, and natural capital. Despite these challenges, producers expressed broad support for farm bill programs and reported trusting Extension, agricultural suppliers, and RFD-TV as key sources of information, highlighting the importance of social and human capital in navigating policy decisions. These findings suggest that producers' operational concerns and policy support are interconnected and cannot be fully understood without considering the relationships among multiple forms of community capital. These findings highlight the need for system-based leadership approaches and agricultural and rural policies that address the primary concerns of producers. By aligning education, leadership development, and communication strategies with producer needs, the agricultural industry can strengthen workforce capacity, support informed decision-making, and promote long-term system resilience.

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