



Sustaining sustainable agriculture: The rise and fall of the Fund for Rural America

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Abstract. Sustainable agriculture has lately made significant inroads into US agricultural policy discourse. An examination of the “life cycle” of the Fund for Rural America, a component of the 1996 farm bill, provides an example of the complex and contested ways in which the goals of sustainable agriculture are advocated, negotiated, and implemented at the level of national policy, in the context of the evolving political and institutional arrangements of American agricultural policy. The Fund, with its relatively large endowment of \$100 million annually, and its explicit emphasis on alternative agriculture research, is emblematic of both the growing political effectiveness of the alternative agriculture movement and the increasing institutionalization of alternative agriculture representatives in Federal agencies. The untimely demise of the Fund in the appropriations process, however, illustrates the extent to which certain key spaces within the state remain outside sustainable agriculture’s broadening sphere of influence. This suggests that while some aspects of the movement’s organizing strategy are indeed effective, some may need to be rethought in light of the experience with the FRA.

Key words: Agricultural research, Fund for Rural America, Sustainable agriculture, US agricultural policy

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Introduction

If we can agree with Buttel (1997) that “under advanced capitalism, the general achievement of sustainability must inherently be a direct or indirect state regulatory practice” (351), then we must look to the regulatory/policymaking sphere as the primary and most consequential locus of struggles for a sustainable agriculture. Struggles taking place in this arena reflect the growing diversity of voices being heard about what constitutes good agricultural policy. Provisions, both proposed and adopted, that more explicitly support alternative agriculture are becoming increasingly common, as policies enacted during the last three Farm Bill cycles, such as the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program (SARE) and the National Organic Plan, illustrate. Yet the systemic constraints to achieving genuine and lasting regulatory support for alternative agriculture remain formidable.

This paper chronicles the legislative and administrative “life cycle” of the Fund for Rural America, an initiative included in the 1996 Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act (FAIR, or the farm bill). As an example of a recent initiative for legislative support of alternative agriculture, the Fund (or FRA) is an illuminating and useful case study for a

number of reasons: first, it had an explicit emphasis on sustainable rural development and an innovative, inclusive, and multidisciplinary approach to agricultural research. Second, with an original authorization of \$300 million over three years, it is by far the largest single allocation of funding for sustainable agriculture from Federal coffers to date.¹ Third, its passage was substantially due to the influence of a newly-constituted coalition of groups that brought together a diverse spectrum of interests and priorities from sustainable agriculture, rural development, environmentalism, and conservationism. Fourth, the alternative spirit of the Fund was maintained and refined inside the USDA, an agency that is often characterized as “captured” by agribusiness interests. Fifth – and perhaps most consequentially – despite this strong political support from the grassroots and the administration, and despite the groundswell of excitement its programs generated, the FRA was quickly and quietly abandoned in subsequent appropriations processes. Eighteen months after the enactment of FAIR, for all practical purposes it was defunct. Only a relatively insignificant fraction of its authorization was ever made available.

Many commentators critical of the ecological and social irrationality of the current agrifood system

look to social movements as an important, if not the primary, mechanism for negotiating change. Though the constituents of what has come to be called the sustainable agriculture movement are acknowledgedly highly diverse and at times have pursued conflicting agendas, the story of the Fund reflects a trend toward political coalition-building among these diverse constituents, who are increasingly finding common ground in the “ongoing struggle to define a place for nonmarket social and environmental concerns that are threatened by an increasing emphasis on agricultural competitiveness in global markets” (Barham, 1997: 239). Thus the inclusion of the Fund in the 1996 farm bill supports Henderson’s (1998) assertion that “from a scattering of isolated individuals practicing alternative farming methods and small, local organizations, sustainable agriculture is swelling into a significant social movement with a national network and an effective policy wing” (113).

Yet, many in the movement still regard government agencies as “black boxes” in which movement influence is attenuated. Merrigan (1993), for example, claims “battles over implementation are fought behind the scenes at USDA where grassroots power – the strength of the sustainable agriculture movement – is neutralized” (158). How the Fund was handled inside the USDA and by Congressional appropriators once it was enacted becomes, then, an important – and complex – component of its story. My exploration of certain aspects of these implementation battles, focusing on the development and implementation of the Fund’s competitive grants provisions, and the ultimate defunding of the FRA during the appropriations process, complicates this claim. Indeed, inside the USDA, the Fund’s spirit as an innovative program in support of alternative approaches to agricultural research was championed and defended by a group of newcomers to the agency, appointed by President Clinton and Secretary Glickman, who were themselves “movement people” and who effectively represented the interests of sustainable agriculture and were committed to alternative agriculture and community-based rural development. As sustainable agriculture has become increasingly institutionalized, greater numbers of these “movement people” have found themselves on the inside. Their ability to present potentially radical ideas in politically acceptable terms and their roles as practical actors in the implementation of programs such as the FRA and as allies of the alternative agriculture movement represents a significant opportunity for the movement to pry open the black boxes and to illuminate their workings. Yet, as the demise of the FRA in the appropriations process demonstrates, certain key spaces within the state remain outside sustainable agriculture’s broadening sphere of influence.

Building coalition: The constitution of the sustainable agriculture movement in the 1990s

Modern perspectives on agrifood systems illustrate that agricultural development in the United States is the product of a series of deliberate and specific political-historical choices that have borne profound economic, social, and ecological repercussions for rural communities. Rural sociologists, geographers, agroecologists, political economists, and others have documented and struggled with the rural transformation and social change engendered by increasing intensification, concentration, capitalization, corporatization, and globalization of agriculture caused by historical state pursuit of these specific agrarian policies (see, for example, Goldschmidt, 1947; Buttel and Newby, 1980; FitzSimmons, 1990; Friedmann, 1982; Goodman and Redclift, 1991; Goodman and Watts, 1994; Friedland et al., 1991; Munton, 1992).

Those who mount the most comprehensive and fundamental critiques of the effects of modern policy on the structure of US agriculture often do so in the name of sustainability. Indeed, sustainable agriculture has lately gained a firm foothold in the political landscape of agricultural policy, and has had a significant practical effect on the policy environment. Reports such as the National Research Council’s (1989) influential *Alternative Agriculture* and the USDA’s (1980) *Report and Recommendations on Organic Farming* evidence policymakers’ increasing attention. Recent farm bill cycles have seen the adoption and increasing funding of programs such as the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, the Integrated Farm Management program, and the National Organic Program.

The growing popularity of sustainability as both a discursive device and a policy goal, however, has brought the danger of its co-optation. While, as Youngberg et al. (1993) observe, “as an abstract symbol, sustainability has become agriculture’s central goal and rallying cry – its predominant ideology” (296), its popularity as a symbol has effectively robbed sustainability of any unifying vision. Because, of course, “[n]o one wants an *unsustainable* agriculture” (Ikerd, 1997: 1), the goal of sustainable agriculture has become co-opted by “virtually every constituency with an interest in agriculture” (Youngberg et al., 1993: 295) and has assumed so many meanings as to become practically meaning *less*. Currently, prescriptions for making agriculture more sustainable run the gamut from technocratic to luddite, and from Marxist to market-oriented. In short, agricultural sustainability has become a buzz-phrase.

Despite a vague recognition that “[t]he very decentralization and lack of hierarchical leaders that has

impeded the convergence of the movement is, at the same time, the source of its great populist vitality” (Henderson, 1998: 113), the confusion over *what* sustainable agriculture means and how it can and should be achieved has plagued and frustrated movement activists. An excellent example is the 1990 farm bill negotiations, in which sustainable agriculture activists felt hamstrung by the fact that their own lack of communication, coalition, and coherent vision among the diverse groups advocating alternatives prevented them from effectively communicating with policymakers, and hence from translating much of their agenda into policy. As Merrigan (1993) recounts,

This lack of a single, unifying image caused many problems ... a prime example being the infamous Senate floor debate over the LISA[SARE] program. When Senator Grassley proposed deleting much of this popular program, a handful of Senators stood up in its defense. But it was clear that no one fully grasped the meaning or definition of sustainable agriculture; Senators on both sides were grappling for ways to express their vague notions of what was important (158).

After the 1990 farm bill, organizations advocating alternative agriculture on the national level regrouped. With the lessons of the 1990 farm bill in mind, the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (MSAWG), one of five regional SAWGs formed in the late 1980s and early 1990s to better network regional and national alternative agriculture efforts, initiated an ambitious effort to build a truly politically powerful coalition with a relatively unified and coherent vision. During 1992 and 1993, MSAWG and the other regional SAWGS organized the National Dialogue on Sustainable Agriculture, convening dozens of meetings, roundtables, and discussions throughout the country in order to identify common ground among stakeholders (Henry Wallace Institute, 1995; Henderson, 1998). This “highly participatory” and comprehensive process catalyzed a wave of coalition-building that led to the formation in 1994 of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture (NCSA). This decentralized, loose affiliation of over 500 activist and advocacy organizations represents the diverse and at times conflicting interests of family farmers, environmentalists, consumers, farmworkers, rural communities, food security groups, and minority farmers dedicated to reorienting national agricultural policy towards sustainability (NCSA, 1997). In anticipation of the 1996 farm bill, the NCSA and its affiliate organizations produced substantial and specific policy recommendations, including,

- foster family farms and increase farm income,
- improve the status of minority farmers and farmworkers,
- advance new, locally-controlled marketing and business opportunities,
- support community-based food and nutrition initiatives,
- create new farming opportunities (NCSA, n.d.; 1994a,b,c).

The excitement ensuing the formation of the National Campaign was effervescent. To many in the alternative agriculture movement who had been struggling for years to bring an authoritative presence to the national agricultural policy discourse, the National Dialogue and the formation of the NCSA “marked a new and impressive level of organizational sophistication and political potential within the alternative agriculture movement” (Henry Wallace Institute, 1994: 1):

The National Campaign includes broader constituent and geographical diversity than ever before. By continuing to build larger coalitions, this process has had the ability to influence national agricultural legislation and lead to a unified vision for a national food system (Burns et al., 1994).

Like a vast jigsaw puzzle that someone dropped in a dark closet, the pieces have had to discover one another and figure out how to fit together. Many of the pieces have joined in the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture (Henderson, 1998: 113).

Galvanized by this networking effort, the National Campaign set about in earnest to become a significant presence in the upcoming farm bill debates.

The farm bill debates and the origin of the Fund

The 1996 farm bill was indeed an intensely negotiated piece of legislation. The protracted and hard-fought debates in Congress were dominated by two prevailing and interrelated political priorities. The first and most influential was a bipartisan preoccupation with increasing international agricultural competitiveness in the new global marketplace shaped by trade liberalization initiatives such as GATT and NAFTA. The second, trumpeted primarily by a newly-energized “revolutionary” Republican majority, was to balance the Federal budget at seemingly any cost. In this context, it became clear very early that existing farm policy would be comprehensively restructured. The new farm bill was expected to reform US agricultural policy to accommodate the increasing globalization of

commodity and capital flows. New Deal farm programs, fundamental to US agricultural policy for 60 years, were noisily denounced by Republicans and Democrats alike as impediments to the new free market/free trade paradigm. Committee hearings and floor debates were peppered with characterizations of New Deal agricultural commodity programs and price supports as “welfare for farmers,” as bloated relics of big government, as anachronistic interventionism, and, fundamentally, as incompatible with free trade (US Congress, Senate, 1995a,b; Hosansky, 1995, 1996a). As the Farm Bill took shape, this gospel of efficiency and competitiveness increasingly dominated the discourse. Even urban and suburban liberals, typically skeptical of free trade, attacked farm spending in an era when other social spending was being scaled back so drastically (Hosansky, 1995).

Defenders of the existing system of Federal farm support were allied more along geographical than party lines, representing areas still primarily economically dependent on agriculture. They recognized the profound effects that phasing out traditional farm payments would have on their constituents, and were especially opposed to the deep proposed cuts in the Commodity Credit Corporation:

We know that these cuts were not conceived in the context of any consideration to good farm policy. Rather, the decision to cut the very heart out of farm programs is integral to the radical Republican policy of cutting \$270 billion out of Medicare and providing for a \$245 billion tax cut (US Congress, House, 1996b).

USDA also played a significant role in resisting the massive budget cuts, which represented a direct threat to the agency. Glickman and others in the administration took the attitude of “we’re just going to have to do our best to minimize the damage” (quoted in Hosansky, 1995: 1631).

Amidst this air of urgency, the original Fund for Rural America was negotiated in the House Agriculture Committee. As a political device, the Fund was conceived as a way to recapture a significant fraction of the approximately \$13 billion in budget cuts that the early versions of the farm bill proposed (Meister, 9/17/99; Hoefner, 5/2/99). Its initial version proposed an impressive \$3.5 billion in funding over 7 years for research and rural development activities to assist farmers in making the transition to more market-based farm policies (US Congress, House, 1996a). According to one committee member, the Fund would

... simply allow rural America to adjust to the changing conditions in government spending that exist today and that will be intensified with this and other

deficit reduction legislation. There is no other sector of the budget that is taking this kind of devastating reduction. It is not hard to determine that these funds are desperately needed, even though they will address only some of the critical needs (US Congress, House, 1996b).

While the original intent of the Fund was primarily to maintain the flow of assistance to farmers in an era of decreasing commodity supports, the development of the Fund’s specifics was significantly influenced by the efforts of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, which singled out the FRA as its top agenda item in the farm bill. The NCSA saw in the Fund’s development an opportunity to move beyond a formulaic commodity payment structure that rewarded large monocultures at the expense of small, diversified operations. Early in the process, in consultation with allies at USDA, the NCSA identified the FRA as a significant funding mechanism for the policy goals they had developed during the National Dialogue (Hoefner, 5/2/99). In the words of one NCSA member, the Fund had the potential to

... approach rural development in a much different way than traditional programs [by] funding a wide range of projects, from farmworker housing to drinking water, and from assistance for beginning and minority farmers to direct marketing, value-added, and research initiatives supporting sustainable agriculture and family farm opportunities (Leval, 3/13/99).

By aggressively lobbying influential committee staffers and USDA representatives, National Campaign lobbyists Ferd Hoefner and Kathleen Merrigan worked to incorporate into the Fund crucial elements of the NCSA agenda, including an explicit emphasis on environmental sustainability; local, community-based development; and participatory, “outcome-oriented” research (Meister, 9/17/99; Hoefner, 5/2/99; US Congress, 1996).

The original \$3.5 billion FRA, however, never made it out of the Republican-controlled House Agriculture Committee. Prioritized by vocal support from President Clinton and Secretary Glickman, and sponsored by influential Agriculture Committee members Leahy (D-VT), Ford (D-TN), and Daschle (D-SD), it then reappeared, albeit in a much more modest incarnation, in floor debates in early February. The initial funding level of \$3.5 billion requested in committee had been cut roughly in half, but the intent of the Fund to offset the phasing out of the CCC remained: in its first version introduced on the floor, the amendment mandated that \$250 million annually be transferred directly from the CCC to the FRA from 1996 through

2002. As the bill evolved and subsequent versions of the Fund reappeared on the floor throughout February and March, its authorization was whittled down to \$300 million over 3 years, and, importantly, the CCC was no longer specified as the source of FRA funds. Finally, late on the night of March 28, a weary Senate passed, by a hasty voice vote, the amendment that included the Fund in FAIR (Hosansky, 1996c).

Though its Congressional sponsors were ultimately able to achieve only a fraction of the level of funding they had lobbied for, the Fund's passage nevertheless generated considerable excitement among its supporters. In his remarks on signing the FAIR, Clinton seized upon the FRA as a symbol of his administration's commitment to protecting family-scale agriculture. He characterized the Fund as one of the few bright spots in an otherwise misguided bill that did not do enough to protect family farms, and as an important tool to mitigate the effects of the weakened safety net (Clinton, 1996).

Rural leaders and alternative agriculture advocates were excited as well by the potential of such a relatively large endowment set aside for purposes that resonated with the goals of sustainable agriculture:

Many ... are looking at implementation of the new farm bill with an anticipation similar to that of children in a toy store: they just can't wait. The reason for the anticipation is the Fund for Rural America (Stotts, 1996: n.p.).

Illuminating the black box: Development and implementation of the competitive grants initiative

The fate of recent Federal initiatives in support of alternative agriculture (of which the Fund is exemplary) have demonstrated that the major challenges in effecting change lie not necessarily in getting policy and programs enacted, but instead in *maintaining* their original integrity and keeping them funded and operational once they enter the twin "black boxes" of USDA and appropriations. Indeed, following through on policy enacted has been a perennial obstacle for movements whose strengths lie primarily at the grassroots level, while corporate agribusiness interests have traditionally enjoyed wide avenues of opportunity to influence this phase of the regulatory process.

Since its authorizing language was somewhat vague in reference to the nature, intent, and scope of the Fund (US Congress, 1996), it left significant room for interpretation, and set the stage for a struggle over the definition of funding priorities. The conceptualization and implementation of the Fund's competitive research grants component is exemplary

of both the increasing penetration of sustainable agriculture interests into the state, and the extent to which this penetration remains fragile at certain places in the process.

The Federal agricultural research establishment has been indicted for both its methodology and its focus (McConnell, 1959; Hightower, 1973; Busch and Lacy, 1983; Strange, 1991; Bird, 1991; Thompson and Stout, 1991; Lockeretz and Anderson, 1993; Stauber, 1994). Public research has been consistently criticized for encouraging abstract, reductionist, technological, monodisciplinary approaches to problem-solving, and for disproportionately serving the needs of the largest and best-capitalized farmers, and therefore actively contributing to the uneven development that characterizes the American farm sector. Consequently, both alternative forms of research and research focused on alternative forms of agriculture have gone largely unsupported. The nearly total neglect of the research and education needs of organic farmers is a particularly egregious example (Lipson, 1997). As Bird (1991) notes, "[t]hese criticisms have been supported by scholars whose work has shown that agricultural research is not neutral or value-free, but rather expresses a social and environmental agenda" (i).

Importantly, the Fund's competitive grants program became, in many ways, an internalization of and response to existing critiques of USDA research priorities and a clear attempt to set the Fund apart from the traditional agricultural research paradigm. This is largely due to a coterie of Clinton and Glickman appointees in USDA with a specific and enthusiastic vision for alternative agricultural development. These appointments reflect certain alternative agriculture and rural development networks within the movement that had been "on the outside" and had been invited inside with Clinton's ascendancy.² Two USDA newcomers, Karl Stauber and Barbara Meister, are representative of this group of "movement people."

Appointed in 1994 as the USDA's undersecretary for Research, Extension, and Education, Stauber oversaw the development and implementation process of the FRA. Stauber came to USDA from the vice presidency of the Northwest Areas Foundation, a grantmaking organization serving the northern Great Plains. He had been, and remains, a longtime and active participant in alternative agriculture dialogue at the regional and national level, and a participant in the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture. In a 1994 article in *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture*, Stauber expounded his "treadmill of declining political effectiveness" theory: "Public research and education institutions, blindly following the belief in increased production efficiency as a social goal, help put more and more farmers out of business" (1994:

14). This approach to agricultural development is anachronistic and dangerous, according to Stauber, since it no longer serves the "Common Good." In contrast, Stauber brought to the USDA a vision for the role of the Federal research and education system that was founded on what he called an "ecocentric" approach: to promote an agriculture that "optimizes the balance between human needs and the health of the ecosystem" (13). Ecocentric agriculture could provide a "renewed justification for a changed land-grant university system" (14).

As Stauber's confidential assistant, Barbara Meister was the primary actor in the day-to-day development of the Fund's competitive grants program. Meister, too, is a longtime and committed advocate for alternative agriculture. Her credentials include working under Jim Hightower, a well-known agrarian populist and strident critic of the large-scale bias of Federal research priorities, during his tenure as Texas Agriculture Commissioner.

The design and implementation of the competitive grants program became the responsibility of the newly created National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board, and was undertaken during Fall 1996. The 30-member Board was a product of the streamlining and restructuring of the Department mandated by FAIR. It consisted of appointees nominated by diverse stakeholders and selected by Glickman. This group, under the direction of Meister, evolved and refined the vision of the Fund as an alternative approach to research and rural development. In their inaugural meeting, the Board emphasized the need to "open the Fund to a wider pool of possible recipients" (NAREEE Advisory Board, 1996) than the USDA's "usual suspects." They interpreted the role of the Fund to be to address the gaps in existing programs, particularly the National Research Initiative (NRI), the USDA's flagship competitive grants program, recognizing that "the peer review process which characterizes selections for the NRI grants does not necessarily take full advantage of the nation's diversity of institutions" (NAREEE Advisory Board, 1996). They gave priority to the allocation of FRA grants to chronically underfunded institutions, such as the historically African-American 1890 Land Grant colleges.

The conception of the Fund as unique and innovative is best articulated in the competitive grants program's Request for Proposals, released in late January 1997. The RFP was developed by a USDA Inter-agency Working Group, also under the guidance of Barbara Meister. It clearly reflected Meister's (and Stauber's) commitment to innovation, collaboration, and problem-solving research in the pursuit of agricultural sustainability. Recognizing that "[t]he creation of

the Fund coincides with fundamental reforms to Federal farm programs" that will "shift price and income risk management away from government programs to farmers themselves" (US GPO, 1997: 4384), the authors of the RFP envisaged the FRA as

... a new and distinct element in USDA's portfolio of research, education, and extension programs [that] can mobilize the agricultural knowledge system to respond to the emerging problems faced by agricultural producers and rural communities during this time of change (ibid.).

The RFP solicited projects that sought "systems-oriented approaches to systems-based problems," and endeavored to "integrate the findings or knowledge of multiple disciplines in order to gain the comprehensive understanding needed to solve complex problems" (ibid.). Applicants were encouraged to apply a

... broad rather than reductionistic view ... to research, extension, and education activities that explicitly recognize, account for, and enhance interactions among agricultural activities, environmental quality, and economic or community well-being (ibid., 4386).

When the RFP was released in late January 1997, it generated a groundswell of interest and excitement among rural leaders, NGOs, and alternative agriculture researchers. Response was overwhelming, as the competitive grants program received over 3000 proposals in its first year. This response is a testament to the latent demand for funding for such research and is indicative of the increasing attention paid by rural communities to the viability of alternative economic strategies based on principles of sustainable agriculture, and implies a growing recognition within these communities of the compatibility of sustainable agriculture and rural development agendas.

The review process falters

Despite the rhetorical claims of many in the Administration and in Congress that the FRA represented the future of agricultural research and development (US Congress, House, 1997), significant practical and ideological problems arose during the review process. Although several very innovative and interdisciplinary projects were awarded grants (see Table 1), there is much evidence that the more holistic and inclusive approach to research prescribed by the Fund caused a host of interpretation problems for the reviewers, the majority of whom were themselves embedded in the traditional Land Grant University funding matrix/hierarchy, which informed their own notions of

Table 1. Selected FRA grants awarded.

Project title	Region	Description
Maintaining Land and Community: Center on minority land loss and recovery	South	Improve land security among minority groups in rural US
Center for Biologically Based Pest Management	Northeast	Increase the application of least-toxic pest management in rural areas
Small Farm Center	Appalachia	Research, education and extension to serve the needs of small, limited resource, and minority farmers
Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Stewardship	Intermountain West	Identify and initiate strategies to enhance sustainable agriculture
Center for Community Agricultural Development	Northeast/Great Lakes	Establish collaborations between agricultural, environmental, and consumer groups, to promote development of local food systems
Increasing Adoption of sustainable agriculture and positive community impacts	California	Expand the adoption of biologically-based farming systems and strengthen their positive influences on the social and economic health of rural California communities
Community-based livestock integrated resource management	Colorado	Improve the economic and environmental health of rural Western communities by improving the competitive position and sustainability of independent livestock producers
Market development for organic agriculture products	National	Analyze the market for organic products and evaluate the effects of national organic standards and labeling on organic product markets
Community food sourcing to facilitate rural economic development	Minnesota	Integrate technical capacities to increase the incomes of hundreds of sustainable livestock producers through direct marketing, while expanding employment by supporting small, rural businesses
Native American model of ecological restoration and community enhancement	Northeast	Create a program of education, extension, and research to empower Native American communities in undertaking environmental stewardship projects on their own lands using the foundation of their own cultural traditions
Leveraging community and industry-wide resources to foster biointensive IPM	Wisconsin	Advance the development and adoption of biointensive integrated pest management systems in high-value vegetable production

Source: <http://www.reeusda.gov/fra/>.

what constituted good research.³ For example, all FRA grants awarded in California were channeled to UC Davis, already the largest and best-financed agricultural research institution in the state. Cornell, another top grant-winner in the LGU establishment, was also a major beneficiary (USDA CSREES, 1997). This suggests that although the intention of the FRA designers was to establish a more inclusive competitive grants program supportive of research activities of a larger scope and qualitatively different from those usually undertaken by the dominant LGUs, this was lost on the reviewers, who were caught up in the institutional inertia of LGU culture and traditional funding priorities.

Similar constraints arose on the rural development provisions of the FRA, frustrating the hopes of those who had advocated a more innovative and progressive role for these funds – that is, support for programs and projects that explicitly linked the concerns of marginalized and subordinated groups and the economic security of rural communities to the adoption of alternative and sustainable agricultural practices.⁴ In fact, the reduced funding that was eventually made available was largely channeled into the massive backlog of projects within established programs (US Congress, House, 1997). Because rural development programs have been so devastated in recent budget cycles, as one Senator put it, “the FRA has sort of become this place everybody is told to go for money” (ibid.).

The capping of the program

Ultimately, of the \$300 million originally authorized for the Fund, only a very small fraction was ever appropriated.⁵ In 1997, in what was to be the first year of the Fund’s implementation, one-third of FRA funding was diverted from the competitive grants program by emergency appropriations to flood relief for the Upper Mississippi. Thereafter, money for the Fund’s administration was “capped” by appropriations bills in both FY1998 and 1999. In effect, the capping of legislatively authorized funds prevents money from being spent on program administration. Thus the FRA still officially exists, complete with a still-operable informational web page and electronic mailing list, but with no means to administer the program, it is paralyzed. At this point, while efforts persist in USDA to unlock a fraction of these funds, it is unlikely that the FRA will be resuscitated during the present farm bill cycle.

Why was the FRA left undefended?

The appropriations process is extremely contested and complex, and interpretations of the FRA’s defunding

are various. Agriculture programs of all stripes have been under enormous pressure from budget cutters lately, and for programs perceived as experimental or alternative, the pressure is even greater. During the farm bill process, the Fund was the darling of Glickman and Clinton. Yet less than a year later, it had all but disappeared from the Administration’s budget priorities. Indeed, Clinton’s track record for following through on sustainable rural development initiatives is poor: Woods (1998) tells the story of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission, a failed redevelopment attempt aimed at the poorest, predominantly black regions of the Mississippi Delta headed by then-governor Clinton that is eerily reminiscent of the story of the FRA.

Since its inception, special interests had lobbied aggressively for the Fund’s research to concentrate on areas that served their own priorities. In the absence of strong support of the Fund by the Administration, the critical mass of enthusiasm for the Fund appears to have been displaced during the appropriations process onto a competing program, the Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems, established as part of a 1998 agricultural research bill (USDA CSREES, 1998). With its focus primarily on biotechnology, genomic research, and precision agriculture, the Initiative is much more explicitly supportive of the agenda of capital-intensive corporate agriculture.⁶

Ultimately, however, according to those who witnessed the demise of the Fund, it fell victim to the “perpetual turf battle between authorizers and appropriators” (Hoefner, 5/2/99). The farm bill is largely negotiated and written in the agriculture committees, where sustainable agriculture interests were relatively well represented, but appropriations for agricultural programs are negotiated in an autonomous appropriations committee with its own agenda and balance of power. This committee tends to mirror the larger Congress, which is increasingly composed of representatives with overwhelmingly urban and suburban constituencies, and must accommodate a significantly larger range of interests and agendas. Consequently, supporters of progressive agricultural programs, with their shrinking agrarian constituencies, are left with a shrinking share of the budget to work with. The mandatory authorization given to the Fund was an attempt, then, to stake out guaranteed funding for alternative agriculture. In essence, however, the attempt backfired because the appropriators, a wholly different set of actors, were apparently resentful of what they perceived to be an inappropriate allocation of scarce funds (Meister, 9/17/99). Since much of the money allocated to the competitive grants program had not been spent pending the writing of the RFP and the completion of the review process, and with no-one to speak on its

behalf in the Appropriations Committee negotiations, the Fund became an attractive and convenient target for rankled and budget-wary appropriators (Leval, 3/13/99; Hoefner, 5/2/99; Meister, 9/17/99).

Conclusion: How best to sustain the sustainability movement?

The Fund for Rural America arose in the context of a 1996 Farm Bill debate that was pervaded by the instrumental rationality of efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness in the context of trade liberalization and its emerging effects on the global reorganization of agricultural policy. The most important “outside” actor to the creation of the FRA, the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, was able to successfully channel the immense but historically anarchic energy of sustainable agriculture interests into a relatively coherent vision. An important part of this vision was codified in the FRA. Thus in many important respects, the Fund for Rural America is emblematic of the type of coalition-building and broadening of its base that many who attempt to theorize the alternative agriculture movement identify as essential to its success (Buttel, 1993, 1997; Barham, 1997; Henderson, 1998).

This trend is continuing with the growth of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture. Since 1995, the National Campaign has quadrupled to over 2000 member organizations. Its policy dialogue has entered a new phase with the Wallace Agricultural Policy Project (WAGPOL), an initiative adopted in 1997 and intended to carry on what the National Dialogue started in the early 1990s. As they prepare for the 2002 farm bill, many in the movement expect that the sustainable agriculture agenda will benefit significantly from the organization and vision created by the National Campaign. They assert that at no time has the movement been stronger or more unified, or its challenges more easily discernible (Henry Wallace Institute, 1996, 1997, 1998; NCSA, 1997, 1999). The FRA remains among the Campaign’s top priorities (NCSA, 1998).

The story of the Fund for Rural America offers a glimpse of the evolving political alliances that represent alternatives to technoscientific productivist agriculture in the US regulatory arena, and their potential role in realizing an approach to agricultural research that is more broadly inclusive – or, as in Stauber’s vision, that better serves the Common Good. As the sustainable agriculture movement continues to coalesce and to engage the state increasingly effectively, we can expect to see growing numbers of “movement people” welcomed into government positions. This represents an important and fertile opportunity.

Examining the life-cycle of the Fund also, however, highlights the nature of the systemic constraints facing those – in government and in the movement – who accept Buttel’s challenge to engage the state regulatory practice and to confront the staunchly hegemonic vision of American agricultural development. However daunting, accepting Buttel’s challenge is an important starting point for building a genuinely sustainable agrifood system. Doing so requires further study into where in the regulatory structure the efforts and influence of alternative agriculture advocates are most significantly attenuated, and how the organizing strategy of the movement might be rethought in light of these gaps.

Notes

1. Compare this to a well-known and celebrated program like the Federal Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program (SARE), for example, which is typically funded at approximately \$8 million annually.
2. The details of this process of the “greening” of USDA are beyond the scope of this paper, but would be an important avenue for future research.
3. According to Barbara Meister (9/17/99), although nominations for reviewers were solicited from diverse stakeholders, very few “sustainable ag types” were chosen.
4. Such provisions included a Minority Farmer Outreach Program, a low-interest loan program for disadvantaged farmers, and farmworker housing improvement grants.
5. Precisely how much of the Fund was spent remains an elusive question, and one that this researcher, as a neophyte student of the labyrinthine appropriations process, has been unable to answer.
6. Indeed, in early 2000, much of the funds authorized for the FRA were transferred into the Initiative’s coffers. While the politics surrounding this seem clear enough, the legal mechanism by which it happened remains somewhat mysterious at the time of this writing.

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