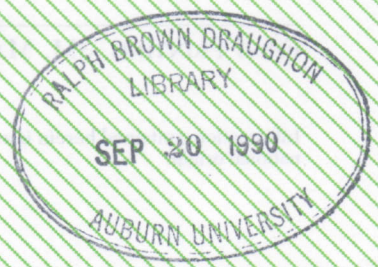


**Farming,
& FOOD,
AGRICULTURE**

Outlooks
and
perceptions
of
Alabama
residents



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Information contained herein is available to all persons without regard to race, color, sex, or national origin.

FARMING, FOOD, AND AGRICULTURE: Outlooks and Perceptions of Alabama Residents¹

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AGRICULTURE is a fundamental part of Alabama's economy because it creates wealth from the most basic resources—the land and the people. Various estimates place the farming and agribusiness contribution to Alabama's Gross State Product at between 10 and 20 percent. Clearly, agriculture is the State's largest industry, yet farm people comprise less than 6 percent of the State's population (7).

Alabama agriculture has undergone many changes in recent years. Alabama farmers have withstood over 5 years of low product prices, rising input costs, and falling land values. Also, a global oversupply of food and fiber has resulted in increased international competition, meaning that overseas markets offer few prospects for immediate relief for the farmer. As a consequence, fewer people are operating larger farms across the State, many are turning to off-farm employment, and the future of Alabama agriculture seems uncertain.

Fewer and fewer non-farm people have contact with or understanding of agricultural or farm issues, further complicating matters. It is not well understood how Alabamians feel about farming and agriculture or how they perceive the future of the industry. Farm families in the State are experiencing the direct effects of the agricultural crisis, but the extended consequences of continued declines in agriculture are not clear.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to examine public perceptions of agriculture and the future of farming. The report is addressed to farmers, agribusiness leaders, employees of public agencies serving

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agriculture, and the general public. The results should provide a statistical profile of how Alabama residents feel about agriculture, farmers, and selected public issues related to the agricultural industry.

One objective is to understand the nature of beliefs about the agricultural crisis and its effect on family farms in the State.

A second objective is to examine preference for the role of government in the agricultural sector. Price supports, loan programs, research, extension, and other interventions endeavor to provide stability and a floor of support for farm operators.

The third objective of the report is to profile public opinion on a series of humanitarian and resource issues as they relate to agriculture. The relationship between farmers and the rest of society is influenced in many ways by the side effects or impacts of resource use in production agriculture. Thus, the way the public views many of these ancillary issues has a direct bearing on support for farmers and agriculture in general.

DATA AND METHOD

Data for this study were obtained from a statewide random sample of Alabama households contacted in a spring 1986 mail survey. As a contribution to a regional research project, the questionnaire was designed to assess beliefs about various issues related to the financial situation of farm operators, the place of farming in society, and the role of government in protecting, regulating, and supporting agriculture. Questionnaire content reflected the ongoing dialogue about farming, farm subsidies, and the relationship of agriculture to society. The results reported here represent the Alabama portion of a more extensive national study.

The sample was randomly drawn from a computer-merged listing of residential telephone subscribers and automobile owners maintained by a national marketing firm. The sample frame should be representative of nearly all households in Alabama, although households which do not possess a telephone nor register an automobile would be excluded (most households with unlisted telephones would be included).

In January 1986, a questionnaire and cover letter explaining the purpose and intent of the study were mailed to each household in the sample. One week later a reminder postcard was sent. Two weeks later a second questionnaire was mailed. The following week another reminder postcard was mailed. A third questionnaire was sent a month later, again followed by a reminder postcard (2).

In Alabama, questionnaires were mailed to 779 households. Bad

addresses, deceased respondents, refusals, and completed questionnaires accounted for 54 percent of the sample. Completed, usable questionnaires were available for 327 Alabama respondents and 2,901 questionnaires were received from other states.

Measurement and Analysis

Beliefs about farmers, the future of farming, and the role of government in the agricultural sector were assessed with a fixed format response framework “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” to tap direction and intensity of sentiment. For purposes of analysis, these responses were reduced to three categories, “agree,” “undecided,” and “disagree.” Sets of questionnaire items were examined in terms of patterns of agreement or disagreement. Respondents also were asked to provide selected background characteristics as well as the nature of their previous experience with farming and agriculture.

The data are summarized in a series of tables showing patterns of response to clusters of questionnaire items addressing a common theme or subject. A final table summarizes the major points of differences between Alabamians and the national sample.

Sample Representativeness

To assess the degree to which the sample represents the actual population of Alabama residents, certain comparisons were made between the sample and 1980 Census of Population data. Table 1 compares selected sample characteristics with census of population profiles for the State (6). The data over-represent men, under-represent blacks, and under-represent persons with a high school education or less schooling. Thus the results may not fully generalize to female, minority, and lower education respondents.

The sample bias reflects a primary limitation of mail surveys, that is, compliance is dependent on the ability to read. In Alabama, where about 25 percent of all adults have 8 years of schooling or less, the literacy level of the population is an inherent methodological issue in any mail survey. Similarly, telephone surveys also have a sample bias because approximately 11.8 percent of Alabama households do not possess telephones. (6). The most accurate, but also the most time-consuming and expensive, approach to survey research in Alabama is the face-to-face household interview, an option not available given the scope of the study and the resources available.

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, the data examined here represent the sole current, comprehensive profile of Alabama opinion on agriculture and farm issues. The analysis proceeds on the

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF PERSONS BY SELECTED PERSONAL AND HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS IN 1986 STATEWIDE SURVEY AND 1980 CENSUS OF POPULATION, ALABAMA

Characteristic	Statewide survey	Alabama total	Difference
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>
Sex			
Male	71.3	48.0	23.3
Female	28.7	52.0	-23.3
Race			
Black	7.4	25.6	-18.2
White	91.7	73.9	17.8
Other9	.5	.4
Age			
34 years and younger	26.5	37.3	-10.8
35 to 64 years	59.3	45.7	13.6
65 and older	14.2	17.0	-2.8
Education			
Some high school or less	16.3	25.0	-8.7
High school graduate	27.3	50.3	-23.0
Some college	28.3	12.5	15.8
College graduate	28.1	12.2	15.9
Family Income			
Less than \$10,000	9.4	37.6	-28.2
\$10,000 to \$14,999	12.3	16.2	-3.9
\$15,000 to \$24,999	25.5	25.0	.5
\$25,000 and over	52.8	21.2	31.6
<i>Number</i>	327	3,893,888	

basis of these qualifications and the unmatched opportunity the study presents for understanding fundamental beliefs about farming and agriculture in the State.

FINDINGS

How Alabama Residents See Farming and Farmers

Financial Condition

Responses to questions about the financial situation of farm operators are shown in table 2. Few respondents believed that farmers get most of the consumer's food dollar, and few thought that most farmers are wealthy. About 90 percent felt that most food profits go to processors and distributors, not farmers.

These perceptions are fairly accurate, as recent USDA data show that farmers receive about 25 cents of the consumer's food dollar (on average). The distribution of wealth in the agricultural sector closely resembles the rest of society. However, the profits farmers receive have been low for the past 5 years and the proportion of consumer expenditures going to farmers is projected to drop to 24 percent of the total (3).

The idea that farmers should appreciate their pastoral lifestyle and not worry about their incomes received little support among

TABLE 2. BELIEFS ABOUT THE FINANCIAL STATUS OF FARM OPERATORS, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. Most of the money consumers spend on food goes to the farmer	2.5	4.0	93.5	2
2. Most farmers are wealthy	4.6	4.9	90.5	3
3. Farmers ought to appreciate farming as a good way of life and be less concerned about their cash income	13.3	12.4	74.3	4
4. Most of the time, farmers make reasonable profits when they sell their products	27.7	25.1	47.2	2
5. Today, most farmers are in financial trouble	70.8	12.0	17.2	2
6. Most profits in the food business go to processors and distributors, not to farmers	90.1	6.2	3.7	9
N = 327				

Alabamians. About a third felt that farmers make reasonable profits, although more than 70 percent felt that most farmers are in financial trouble. However, recent estimates indicated that only 25 to 30 percent of Alabama's farmers are in immediate financial danger.

The Family Farm

Table 3 indicates that those responding to the survey perceive little support for increasing food prices to preserve family farming. On the other hand, few are willing to place production efficiency over preservation of the family farm (26.3 percent). Family farms are not inherently inefficient. Farms can become larger, achieve production efficiencies, and still retain a form of family-based organization. In many cases, family farming is a more efficient form of organization than corporate or group forms of organization because the latter forms cannot sustain the commitment or extraordinary response to crisis or peak-load situations characteristic of the family farm.

Item 3 suggests that when respondents speak for themselves, more would be willing to pay higher food prices to support the family farm, but the proportion is still less than 42 percent. Responses may reflect doubt about whether an increase in food prices would be directly transmitted to the farm level or largely captured by processing and marketing intermediaries.

Two-thirds felt that corporate farms should pay more taxes than family farms. Nearly 80 percent believed that the family farm should be preserved because it is a vital part of our heritage. Clearly, family farming is a strongly supported concept among Ala-

TABLE 3. BELIEFS ABOUT THE FAMILY FARM, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. Obtaining greater efficiency in food production is more important than preserving the family farm	25.8	21.4	52.8	5
2. Most consumers would be willing to have food prices raised to help preserve the family farm	27.9	16.6	55.5	1
3. Family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices	42.1	23.8	34.1	4
4. Corporate farms should pay more taxes than family farms	67.0	11.4	21.6	3
5. The family farm must be preserved because it is a vital part of our heritage ..	79.1	8.3	12.6	2
N = 327				

bama residents. Yet there is some question about the depth of commitment the public may have if support implies some sacrifice.

The Role of Government in Agriculture

Farm Problems

Less than a quarter of the respondents felt that farmers complain too much about their problems, table 4. Similarly, a minority felt that farmers get more than their share of government benefits or that farmers get too much money from government programs.

About 43 percent believed that farmers should compete in a free market without government support. The proportion agreeing rose to 56 percent in response to the idea that the government should treat farms just like any other business.

TABLE 4. BELIEFS ABOUT FARM PROBLEMS AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. Farmers complain too much about their problems	23.0	15.3	61.7	1
2. Farmers get more than their fair share of government benefits	23.7	26.2	50.1	2
3. Farmers get too much money from government programs	26.5	27.4	46.1	2
4. Farmers should compete in a free market without government support	42.2	24.3	33.5	2
5. The government should treat farms just like other businesses	56.5	14.7	28.8	1
N = 327				

Farm Size

Less than 9 percent felt that the government should encourage consolidation of farms to achieve greater production efficiencies, table 5. Few respondents believed that the government should limit the amount of farmland ownership. About 21 percent thought that most farms were too large, however.

About 46 percent felt that farmland should be owned by the person who operates it. A like percentage thought that corporate ownership of farmland should be limited. Almost half believed that large farms get too many government benefits, although nearly a third were undecided on this issue.

Small Farms

Table 6 shows that about 12 percent felt that small farm operators were in agriculture because they failed to develop or acquire other occupational skills. Over 37 percent felt that publicly funded agricultural research should mainly focus on the problems of small farms. About 47 percent thought that small farms produce better food. There is a solid dimension of support for small farms among Alabamians, but clearly a majority do not feel strongly about it.

Government Involvement

Table 7 shows that only 16 percent thought that the government should not be involved at all in agriculture (64 percent disagreed). Nevertheless, only 17 percent thought that the previous level of involvement was about right. Many were undecided on this item.

About 38 percent felt that government involvement had helped

TABLE 5. BELIEFS ABOUT FARM SIZE AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree <i>Pct.</i>	Undecided <i>Pct.</i>	Disagree <i>Pct.</i>	No answer <i>No.</i>
1. Government should encourage the consolidation of farms into larger units to achieve greater efficiency.....	8.3	21.9	69.8	3
2. We should have laws limiting the amount of farmland one person can own	11.0	10.4	78.6	1
3. Most farms today are too large.....	20.8	26.7	52.5	5
4. Farmland should be owned by the person who operates it.....	46.0	18.5	35.5	3
5. We should have laws that limit the ownership of farmland by corporations	46.4	18.0	35.6	4
6. Large farms get too many government benefits	50.0	32.5	17.5	1

N = 327

TABLE 6. BELIEFS ABOUT SMALL FARMS, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. Small farmers are farming because they failed to develop or acquire other skills	11.4	12.3	76.3	2
2. Publicly funded agricultural research should be primarily directed to small farms.....	36.5	22.9	40.6	4
3. Small farms generally produce better quality food products than large farms	46.7	30.5	22.8	2

TABLE 7. BELIEFS ABOUT THE PROPRIETY AND IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN AGRICULTURE, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. The government should not be involved in agriculture at all	15.7	20.7	63.6	3
2. Government involvement in agriculture has been about right	17.1	35.2	47.7	6
3. Government involvement in agriculture has helped consumers	37.9	30.4	31.7	3
4. Government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers.....	40.8	28.2	31.0	4

consumers. Slightly more (40 percent) felt that government involvement in agriculture had hurt farmers. The pattern of response to the items in this table suggests a great deal of uncertainty or confusion about the role of government in agriculture, except for the idea that there was some base level of involvement that is necessary or appropriate.

Policy Directions

The respondents were split over the notion of minimum support prices for farm products, table 8. More than half felt that the government should help farmers own their farmland. Approximately 60 percent supported a special policy to ensure that family farms survive. And 62 percent felt that government programs should focus on getting young people started in farming. Clearly, in spite of the declining numbers of farm people, there is considerable support for agriculture among members of the general public.

Farmland Protection

The conversion of farmland to urban and suburban uses has received a great deal of attention in recent years (4). Table 9 indicates

TABLE 8. BELIEFS ABOUT GOVERNMENT POLICY IN AGRICULTURE, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. Government should guarantee a minimum price to farms for their products	42.0	21.0	37.0	3
2. Government should help as many farmers as possible to own their farmland	52.8	17.6	29.6	3
3. Government should have a special policy to ensure that family farms survive	60.4	17.3	22.3	3
4. Government programs should help young people get started in farming ...	62.3	17.6	20.1	3

N = 327

widespread concern over the use and control of farmland in Alabama. About 73 percent felt that policies should be established to protect farmland from urban growth, and 77 percent thought good farmland should be protected from other land uses. More than 91 percent felt that foreign ownership of farmland should be restricted. It is interesting to note in light of this concern that less than 2 percent of Alabama land is foreign-owned (1).

Resource and Humanitarian Issues

Soil Conservation

About 25 percent felt that soil conservation programs had been carried too far, but 37 percent thought the government should pay farmers to practice soil conservation. Slightly more (42 percent) felt that farmers who do not conserve their soil should be financially penalized. About a quarter of the sample was undecided on each of these items, table 10.

Although 63 percent felt that most farmers took good care of

TABLE 9. BELIEFS ABOUT FARMLAND PROTECTION, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. There should be a governmental policy to protect prime farmland from urban growth.....	73.2	14.8	12.0	3
2. Good farmland should be protected from other land uses	77.0	10.7	12.3	2
3. Governmental policy should restrict the amount of foreign ownership of United States farmland	91.1	4.9	4.0	3

N = 327

TABLE 10. BELIEFS ABOUT SOIL CONSERVATION ISSUES, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. Given the economic realities, soil conservation programs are often carried too far	25.2	28.0	46.8	2
2. The government should pay farmers to practice soil conservation	37.9	23.0	39.1	5
3. Farmers who fail to adopt needed soil conservation practices should be financially penalized	41.7	25.0	33.3	3
4. Laws regulating excess soil erosion are badly needed	58.6	29.5	11.9	8
5. Most farmers take good care of the soil	62.4	23.1	14.5	3
6. Land owners have responsibilities to protect soil resources for future generations	93.8	4.3	1.9	3
N = 327				

the soil, a majority (59 percent) felt that laws regulating excess soil erosion are badly needed. A widely shared belief is that land owners must protect soil resources for future generations.

International Food Assistance

The data in table 11 clearly underscore widespread support among Alabama residents for U.S. involvement in international development. Only 37 percent thought that our nation should use food as a political weapon. About 53 percent felt that we should help feed

TABLE 11. BELIEFS ABOUT INTERNATIONAL FOOD ASSISTANCE, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. The U.S. government should use food as a political weapon when dealing with other countries	37.2	22.3	40.5	4
2. The U.S. should help feed the poor in developing countries	53.8	22.0	24.2	5
3. The U.S. should help developing countries produce more food even if they might later compete with us in the world market	60.2	19.4	20.4	3
4. Farm products should be sold only to countries that support the U.S. in world affairs	64.4	10.5	25.1	4
5. The U.S. should help poor countries become self-sufficient in food production	79.9	10.5	9.6	4
N = 327				

the poor in developing countries. Sixty percent thought we should give food production assistance even if the assisted nations might later compete with our country in the world market.

Comparing Item 4 to Item 1 reveals a seeming contradiction. A majority (64 percent) felt that U.S. food products should not be sold to those who do not support us in world affairs. Yet a much smaller proportion felt food should be used as a political weapon. The respondents may be distinguishing a policy response to sustained allies or disloyal foes from single-issue manipulation or coercion of other nations' decisions.

Item 5 shows that nearly 80 percent felt that the United States should help poor countries become self-sufficient in food production. Alabamians clearly support international food assistance and the transfer of agricultural technology to developing nations.

Farm Workers

In an issue closer to home, table 12 shows that few respondents felt that farm workers are paid a fair wage for their labor (22 percent). Also, 42 percent felt that most farm workers have decent working conditions. Many were undecided on both items.

Animal Welfare

Almost 30 percent of the respondents would be willing to pay more for meat if it meant more humane treatment of farm animals, table 13. Nevertheless, 69 percent thought that current laws and regulations are adequate to ensure humane treatment. Almost 80 percent felt that farmers treat their animals humanely. Only 3 percent perceived a problem in the way farmers treat their animals.

Food Quality

Consumers have a wide array of food choices in the marketplace. Table 14 reveals some uncertainty or division over the quality of food that is presently available. On matters of taste, safety, and nutrition, less than half the respondents thought that things were better than they ever have been. Over 60 percent felt that today's food was fresher than ever. Clearly, technology has improved the array

TABLE 12. BELIEFS ABOUT THE WELL-BEING OF FARM WORKERS, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. Most farm workers are paid a fair wage for their labor.....	21.7	25.1	53.2	4
2. Most farm workers have decent working conditions.....	41.9	30.6	27.5	5
N = 327				

TABLE 13. BELIEFS ABOUT ANIMAL WELFARE ON THE FARM, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. I would be willing to pay more for meat if it meant more humane treatment of farm animals.....	29.4	29.4	41.2	4
2. Current laws and regulations when properly enforced and implemented, are adequate to ensure humane care and treatment of farm animals	68.6	22.4	9.0	6
3. Most farmers treat their animals humanely.....	79.4	17.2	3.4	2
N = 327				

TABLE 14. PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD QUALITY, ALABAMA RESIDENTS, 1986

Item	Response			
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	No answer
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>No.</i>
1. Today's food is better tasting than it ever has been.....	33.6	29.3	37.1	3
2. Today's food is safer than it ever has been	41.9	24.8	33.3	1
3. Today's food is more nutritious than it ever has been.....	48.0	25.5	26.5	2
4. Today's food is fresher than it ever has been	61.9	16.4	21.7	9
N = 327				

of available food products, increased the ease of preparation, and reduced waste and spoilage. Alabama consumers seem to have some doubts about the extent of progress or compromises made in the sensory, and perhaps nutritional, aspects of food in order to facilitate home preparation and prolong shelf life.

Contact and Experience with Agriculture

Farm Background

As fewer people operate farms in the State, those with contact or experience with agriculture can be expected to decline. These shifts have implications for public support for agriculture and for the institutions and agencies that serve the farmer. Overall, about one-sixth of the respondents currently own or run a farm. More than half the sample had parents who owned or ran a farm at one time. More than half the respondents had other close relatives in farming, had friends with a farm, and had had a job on a farm at one time. City and rural residents differed most on employment experience and

parental experience with farming. Most respondents had some type of contact with agriculture in the past.

Table 15 shows a multiple response analysis of a series of items reflecting personal exposure to agricultural activities. The data are shown in three categories of residence. Large or medium-sized city, a small city or town, and a rural or farm residence. The sample was about equally divided among these residential settings.

Farm Experience

Table 16 shows widely shared experiences with farming. About 70 percent of the respondents had attended a livestock show. More than three-quarters had visited a farm at some point.

Most indicated some present or past residence near farms. More than 90 percent of the sample had been to county or state fairs or had bought food directly from a producer.

The greatest city-rural differences occurred with respect to actual farm visits and present residence near farms. More than 20 percentage points separated the two categories in each case.

Educational Contact

Table 17 suggests that a minor segment of Alabamians have had formal training or participation in agricultural activities. Less than 7 percent had taken a college agricultural course. Almost 30 percent had completed a high school agricultural course. Less than half had

TABLE 15. EXTENT OF BACKGROUND IN FARMING BY PLACE OF RESIDENCE, ALABAMA, 1986

Background	Yes response, by residence			All respondents
	City	Town	Rural	
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	
1. Currently own or run a farm	9.8	8.5	30.9	16.6
2. Parents ever in farming.....	44.6	54.3	72.2	57.2
3. Other close relatives in farming	51.1	57.4	62.1	57.2
4. Friends in farming.....	41.3	61.7	68.0	57.2
5. Job on a farm.....	38.0	66.0	69.1	58.0
<i>Number</i>	92	94	97	283

TABLE 16. EXPERIENCE WITH FARMING BY PLACE OF RESIDENCE, ALABAMA, 1986

Experience	Yes response, by residence			Total
	City	Town	Rural	
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	
1. Attend livestock show	68.5	69.1	74.2	70.7
2. Visited a farm.....	63.0	75.5	86.6	75.3
3. Live near farms now	56.5	85.1	95.9	79.5
4. Ever lived near farms.....	76.1	87.2	94.8	86.2
5. Bought food from farmer.....	90.2	94.7	91.8	92.2
6. Been to county or state fair	92.4	96.8	93.8	94.3
<i>Number</i>	92	94	97	283

TABLE 17. EDUCATIONAL CONTACT WITH AGRICULTURE BY SIZE OF PLACE, ALABAMA, 1986

Contact	Yes response, by residence			Total
	City	Town	Rural	
	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	<i>Pct.</i>	
1. College agricultural course	6.5	2.1	10.3	6.4
2. High school course	18.5	25.5	38.1	27.6
3. Been in FFA/FHA	20.7	38.3	50.5	36.7
4. Been in 4-H.....	27.2	45.7	62.9	45.6
<i>Number</i>	92	94	97	283

participated in FFA or 4-H.

City residents were most likely to have contact through 4-H (27.2 percent), but nearly two-thirds of the rural residents had this experience. Similarly, slightly more than half the rural or farm residents had been in FFA but only 21 percent of city residents participated in this organization.

Alabama, U.S. Differences

Table 18 shows major points of difference in attitude and belief between Alabama respondents and those from the remainder of the country. The U.S. data are weighted to balance selective over sampling in several Southern States. The items were chosen on the basis of strong differences as evidenced by the chi-square test statistic.

Alabamians were more polarized with respect to the idea that farmers should compete in a free market without government support. More Alabamians agreed, more disagreed, but fewer were undecided about Item 1.

Alabama respondents were less supportive of financial penalties for failure to adopt soil conservation practices (Item 2). Relative to the rest of the country, State residents were more opposed to limits on farmland ownership (Item 3). They also were less likely to agree that farmland should be owned by the person who operates it (Item 4). Alabamians were less supportive of the need for a governmental policy to protect prime farmland from urban growth (Item 5). In general, Alabamians were less willing to endorse governmental involvement in regulating agricultural landholding arrangements.

Item 6 suggests that Alabamians were more critical of sales of farm products to countries that failed to maintain political allegiance to the United States in world affairs. Similarly, residents were more supportive of the use of food as a political weapon (Item 7). Nevertheless, a larger proportion of Alabamians felt that our farmers should raise as much food as possible as long as there are hungry people in the world (Item 8).

More Alabama respondents thought that large farms get too many government benefits (Item 9). Nevertheless, they were more likely to disagree with the idea that farmers have been hurt by govern-

TABLE 18. MAJOR POINTS OF DIFFERENCE IN ATTITUDES TOWARD FARMING AND AGRICULTURE: U.S. AND ALABAMA, 1986

Item	Response ¹		
	Agree <i>Pct.</i>	Undecided <i>Pct.</i>	Disagree <i>Pct.</i>
1. Farmers should compete in a free market without government support.			
Alabama (N = 327).....	42.2	24.3	33.5
Rest of U.S. (N = 3,117).....	37.0	33.6	29.4
2. Farmers who fail to adopt needed soil conservation practices should be financially penalized.			
Alabama.....	41.7	25.0	33.3
Rest of U.S.	41.7	33.0	25.3
3. We should have laws limiting the amount of farmland one person can own.			
Alabama.....	11.0	10.4	78.6
Rest of U.S.	16.1	14.8	69.1
4. Farmland should be owned by the person who operates it.			
Alabama.....	46.0	18.5	35.5
Rest of U.S.	55.1	18.3	26.6
5. There should be a governmental policy to protect prime farmland from urban growth.			
Alabama.....	73.2	14.8	12.0
Rest of U.S.	83.1	10.0	6.9
6. Farm products should be sold only to countries that support the United States in world affairs.			
Alabama.....	64.4	10.5	25.1
Rest of U.S.	53.3	15.3	31.4
7. The United States government should use food as a political weapon when dealing with other countries.			
Alabama.....	37.2	22.3	40.5
Rest of U.S.	26.9	23.0	50.0
8. Farmers should raise all of the crops and livestock possible as long as there are hungry people.			
Alabama.....	56.7	23.5	19.8
Rest of U.S.	49.8	23.8	26.4
9. Large farms get too many government benefits.			
Alabama.....	50.0	32.5	17.5
Rest of U.S.	40.7	44.1	15.2
10. Government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers.			
Alabama.....	40.8	28.2	31.0
Rest of U.S.	40.7	37.7	21.6
11. Farming involves understanding and working with nature; therefore, it is a much more satisfying occupation than others.			
Alabama.....	60.3	21.4	18.3
Rest of U.S.	47.4	25.5	27.1

¹All differences are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$.

ment involvement in agriculture (Item 10). Finally, the high esteem that Alabamians hold for farming as an occupation is reflected in item 11. Alabamians were more likely to perceive farming as a more satisfying occupation, the largest State-nation difference encountered in the study.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study show a great deal of sympathy and support for the Alabama farmer by members of the general public. Television news and newspaper stories seem to have made most respondents aware of the plight of the farmer.

Beliefs about the appropriate response of government to the farm crisis, however, are widely divergent. A majority believe that farms should be treated just like any other business, but more than three-quarters see the family farm as a vital part of our national heritage. Contradictory ideas about the role of government in general and the concept of family farming in particular are a fundamental aspect of public opinion toward agriculture.

Alabamians exhibited strong sentiments about farmland preservation. Solid majorities opposed irreversible conversion of farmland to other uses and supported the protection of good farmland for use by future generations.

Soil conservation was a somewhat less urgently perceived issue. A majority supported stronger laws regulating soil loss, but almost two-thirds felt that most farmers take good care of the soil. Almost all agreed that landowners have broader responsibilities to society and the next generation, and most endorsed legislation to penalize the small minority who flagrantly abuse soil resources.

With respect to international food assistance, Alabamians exhibited a fairly clear mandate for rendering international food relief. The State's residents endorse efforts to help poor countries become self-sufficient in food production. Technology transfer involves technical agricultural training of individuals who will return to their home countries to conduct research and engage in extension activities to assist farmers and farm families. Technology transfer also occurs through the short or long-term presence of trained American agriculturalists who teach, do research, and assist in planning efforts to improve a developing country's farming system. It is clear that these endeavors are widely viewed as positive by Alabamians.

With respect to other agricultural issues, many Alabamians were concerned about the treatment of farm workers. Many were not sure that wages and working conditions were what they should be.

In contrast, there was little concern over mistreatment of farm animals, as most felt that animals were humanely treated.

Alabamians expressed some doubts about the quality of food currently available in grocery stores. Most thought that freshness was better than ever, but many were uncertain about taste, safety, and nutrition. The cost, abundance, and variety of the American food supply are primary dimensions of quality that are unsurpassed by any other nation. No food system ever lacks room for improvement, however, and Alabamians may be properly concerned about the long-term health effects of the inexpensive, readily available food they purchase every day.

Alabamians feel strongly about farming and agriculture. They hold farming as an occupation in high esteem. More than their fellow Americans, they resist government regulation of production practices and the marketplace. Yet they recognize a clear support role for government in agriculture. The data suggest that Alabama residents are particularly sensitive to the implications of agricultural trade in international affairs, feeling that food sales have a political meaning over and above the basic economic transaction. Nevertheless, Alabamians seem to retain an image of American agriculture as a granary for the world.

The contradictions and tensions Alabamians exhibit in their sentiments about farming and the future of agriculture are quite understandable. These are uncertain times and the forces of international competition, world economic stability, and our nation's farm policy are difficult to understand. The future path of Alabama agriculture will be sustained by the strong attachment its residents have for farming coupled with the commitment of farmers to compete in an increasingly complex world.

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