

FOODROUTES NETWORK AND VANGUARD COMMUNICATIONS

FOCUS GROUPS with FARMERS and CONSUMERS

RE: SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

BACKGROUND

Purpose of the Research

On behalf of FoodRoutes Network, Vanguard Communications conducted focus groups with farmers and consumers in three states to:

- Explore perceptions of various terms and phrases such as “sustainable agriculture,” “federal farm policy,” and others; and
- Obtain reactions to selected paragraphs highlighting the link between different aspects of sustainable agriculture and various federal farm policies and programs. Paragraphs were excerpted or paraphrased from different agricultural advocacy organizations’ printed brochures, published studies, or media coverage.

Schedule and Composition of the Groups

Six focus groups were conducted—three with farmers and three with consumers—during the Fall of 2001 in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Arkansas as follows:

<i>Farmer Groups</i>	<i>Consumer Groups</i>
1. Rochester, Minnesota: September 24, 2001	1. Minneapolis, Minnesota: September 24, 2001
2. Lancaster, Pennsylvania: October 9, 2001	2. Exton, Pennsylvania: September 27, 2001
3. Little Rock, Arkansas: December 7, 2001	3. Little Rock, Arkansas: December 6, 2001

Vanguard Communications and FoodRoutes Network chose these locations to assure that the research would represent some regional diversity and corresponding perspectives on different aspects of agriculture and conditions affecting family farming. Minnesota communities were represented because of the influence of Midwest states’ Congressional delegations on federal farm policies and because of the prevalence of subsidy-supported producers of grain and dairy in the region. Pennsylvania locations were included to represent some Northeast issues, including encroachment from suburban development on

farmland and rural communities. States in this region, including Pennsylvania, are home to various anti-sprawl movements and an increased concern about preserving and protecting the environment. Arkansas represented some issues common to the South, including strong population growth and, like the Midwest, has Congressional influence on federal farm policies.

Consumer focus groups were recruited by opinion research companies under the supervision of a research consultant to Vanguard Communications. All participants indicated during the recruitment process that they had voted at least three times during the past ten years; shopped for groceries at least once a week for at least two people; and shopped at least once during the past year someplace other than a traditional grocery store; e.g., a farm market, food cooperative, health food store, store that promotes an organic inventory; or a community supported agriculture enterprise. These groups were diverse in age, race/ethnicity, educational background, and occupation. Consumers were paid \$50 for participating, a typical compensation for focus group participation.

The farmer groups were recruited by USDA cooperative extension agents who were identified by FoodRoutes Network executive director, Tim Bowser. Family farmers were sought who would represent the scope of agricultural activity in each region. "Family farmers" were defined as people who derive a majority of their income from agriculture, are self-employed farmers, and also consider themselves family farmers. Types of agriculture represented included:

Types of family farming represented in the farmers groups...

Minnesota	Pennsylvania	Arkansas
1. Beef and hog livestock/antibiotic and hormone-free meats	1. Farm market (poultry, beef, vegetables); bakery	1. Cattle/poultry (also is town mayor; sells real estate)
2. Grass, beef/cow herd	2. Eggs, corn, soybeans " <i>since I was a child</i> "	2. Cattle/timber linked with son's hog operation. Born/raised in this farm
3. Corn, soybeans, beef/cow herd	3. Third generation fruit/organic wine grapes, compost	3. Rice, soybeans, winter wheat. Farm in family since 1938.
4. Hogs, corn for hog feed, soybeans	4. Community supported agricultural farm	4. Turf grass. Born/raised on dairy farm.
5. Dairy, corn, soybeans, alfalfa	5. Strawberries/raspberries; 25 years	5. 2000 acres (row crops); consultant to schools re agricultural careers
6. Grass	6. Wine grapes/winery	
7. Purebred angus, breeding stock, feed crops	7. Dairy (200 cows); corn, soybeans, alfalfa; fifth generation of family on the land	
8. Cow dairy farm	8. Certified organic produce (10 acres)	
9. Dairy	9. Organic dairy (120 cows); 10,000 turkeys annually; 1,000 tons of compost	
10. Beef		

Farmers who participated in the focus groups were paid between \$50 and \$60 each.

Format and Discussion Topics

The 90-minute discussion groups all were moderated by a consultant with extensive experience managing focus group studies. A former executive vice president of a communication firm, the moderator has worked closely with Vanguard Communications on numerous projects, and has previously conducted focus groups with farmers, consumers, and many other audiences.

In general, farmers discussed:

- Associations with the words “sustainable agriculture”
- Associations with “federal farm policy”
- Reactions to paragraphs about “sustainable agriculture”

The moderator showed the groups various paragraphs, each focusing on a different aspect of the relationship between sustainable agriculture and federal farm policies or programs. The following table shows the focus of and order in which the paragraphs were presented to each group. Copies of the paragraphs are included in the Findings section of this report where these paragraphs are discussed.

Topics of Messages Shown in Farmer Groups Referred to...

<i>Minnesota</i>	<i>Pennsylvania</i>	<i>Arkansas</i>
1. Sprawl 2. Water Quality 3. Public Health 4. Values 5. Consolidation 6. Social Justice 7. Economic Fairness	1. Sprawl 2. Water Quality 3. Public Health 4. Values 5. Social Justice	1. Sprawl 2. Water Quality 3. Public Health 4. Economic Fairness 5. Social Justice 6. Food Security

- What farmers want the public to know about farming

In general, the consumer groups discussed the following topics:

- Recent food purchases
- Reactions to terms and phrases, including (in the order presented to the groups):

Terms and Phrases Discussed in Consumer Groups...

<i>Minnesota</i>	<i>Pennsylvania and Arkansas</i>
“Where food comes from” “Locally grown food” “Environmentally sound farming” “Factory farming” “Agriculture” “Sustainable agriculture” “Family farming” “Foodshed”	“Our food supply” “Foodshed” “Locally grown food” “Organic food” “Sustainable agriculture” “Farmers” “Federal farm policies”

- Reactions to paragraphs about “sustainable agriculture”

As in the farmer groups with farmers, the moderator showed consumers various paragraphs about different aspects of the relationship between sustainable agriculture and federal farm policies or programs. The following table shows the focus of and order in which the messages were presented to each group.

Topics of Messages Shown in Consumer Groups Referred to...(in order presented)

<i>Minnesota</i>	<i>Pennsylvania</i>	<i>Arkansas</i>
1. Economic Fairness 2. Social Justice 3. Consolidation 4. Values 5. Public Health 6. Water Quality 7. Sprawl	1. Consolidation 2. Social Justice 3. Economic Fairness 4. Sprawl 5. Values 6. Public Health 7. Water Quality	1. Sprawl 2. Water Quality 3. Public Health 4. Values 5. Economic Fairness 6. Food Security

Copies of the discussion guides used to facilitate the groups are included in *Appendix 1: Moderator Discussion Guides*.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The following briefly summarizes key findings that emerged from the six groups with farmers and consumers. These findings are discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of the report.

Findings from Farmer Groups About Terms and Issues

1. Farmers' perceptions of "sustainable agriculture"

Three themes were common among farmers' associations with "sustainable agriculture." The term brought to mind:

- The economics of farming and concerns about sustaining long-term economic viability;
- What farmers do to protect and sustain the land for farming and the welfare of the environment; and
- The link between sound environmental practices and economic viability.

2. Farmers' perceptions of barriers to sustainable agriculture

Farmers talked about barriers to sustainable agriculture. They mentioned concerns about:

- **Federal farm policies:** Many of the farmers believed that federal farm policies do not serve farmers and pose a significant barrier to sustainable agriculture.
- **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and state counterparts:** The Arkansas farmer group felt that EPA impedes sustainability with regulations and that it does not recognize farmers' conservation efforts.
- **Consumer lack of understanding about farming realities:** Farmers in all three groups were very concerned about how little consumers understand about where food comes from, what is involved in producing it, nor how little of its cost is profit for farmers; perceptions that farmers disregard human health, wildlife, and environmental concerns; and misconceptions that all sustainable farming is organic.

3. Farmers' reactions to "federal farm policy"

When asked what the words "federal farm policy" bring to mind, most people were critical. "Federal farm policy" brought to mind:

- The adverse effects of farm subsidies on the viability and sustainability of many family farming operations;
- The adverse impact on market prices for farmers;
- Middlemen that mean farmers little of the cost of food goes to farmers;
- Loopholes that allow large corporate farms to qualify for huge subsidies; and

- Tax burden for self-employed farmers, such as being taxed on income used to pay Social Security and health insurance premiums – that other businesses can deduct.

4. What farmers think would help promote sustainable agriculture

In all three groups, farmers said that consumer education about where food comes from and what is involved in farming is crucial to building support for policies and programs that can promote sustainable agriculture. One comment in particular illustrated this concern:

The public does not know what the word “agriculture” means...They assume that agriculture just means production, a farmer on a tractor... why would anyone think that we want to overuse chemicals with the cost of it? We can barely get by as it is without spending thousands of dollars on chemical every month ...The public would be behind us 100% if we can really educate them. If we could really get something in place – long-term education – I feel like the public would support us more than they do and understand how what we do and how we help the land...with legislation, bills, laws...they could be more educated about what the truth really is so they can vote for or against it with a more educated answer.

Findings From Consumer Groups About Terms and Issues

1. Consumers’ recent food purchases

At the beginning of the consumer groups, participants were asked to mention something they recalled about a recent food purchase. Most recollections were about purchases at a traditional grocery store or warehouse store where people shopped because of “good prices” or “convenient location.” Few people mentioned shopping elsewhere, even though everyone had said during the recruitment process that they occasionally shopped at places like farmers’ markets or stores promoting an organic inventory. With further probing, quite a few people said that they shop at farmers’ markets in the summer because of the fresh quality—and good prices. “Low prices” were the strongest influence on where people shop and what they buy.

2. Consumers’ associations with “sustainable agriculture”

Consumers reported a number of different associations with “sustainable agriculture,” including some environmentally sound practices such as crop rotation, and others that resembled what farmers anticipated, such as preservative- or chemical-free foods.

3. Consumers’ reactions to federal farm policy

In general, consumers did not feel that they were at all well-informed about federal farm policy. Their guesses tended to be limited in scope and accuracy, focusing almost exclusively on subsidies. Several comments suggested positive impressions about subsidies as something helpful to farmers (although a few people thought these were “handouts” that farmers should not receive unless other depressed sectors also receive them.)

4. Consumers’ ranking of farm policy objectives

In the Pennsylvania and Arkansas groups, consumers rated “how important” to them each of several potential objectives of farm policy is. The four objectives included:

- Federal farm policy should be helping farmers and ranchers meet public demand for safe, fresh food.
- Federal farm policy should help farmers and ranchers meet public demand for clean water and air, open space, and wildlife habitat.
- Federal farm policies should help meet public demand for low food prices
- Farm policy should protect family farming and the social and economic vitality of rural communities

“Safe, fresh food—drew the highest ratings. It was followed by “low food prices.”

Findings from All Groups About Paragraphs Promoting Sustainable Agriculture

The moderator showed participants in all of the groups at least five of eight paragraphs focusing on different aspects of the relationship between sustainable agriculture and farm policy. Paragraphs were excerpted or paraphrased from different agricultural advocacy organizations’ printed brochures, published studies, or media coverage. Participants were informed that the paragraphs were excerpts that were not intended to stand alone without other information. The intent was to stimulate discussion about the issues that each paragraph raised to determine what key points and issues would be most compelling to farmers and consumers.

The paragraphs focused on:

1. Public Health
2. Water Quality
3. Economic Fairness
4. Sprawl
5. Values
6. Consolidation
7. Food Security
8. Social Justice

1. Overall response to paragraphs about different aspects of sustainable agriculture

Several of the paragraphs focused on issues that the farmers and consumers had identified in the early part of each group’s discussion as important to them: Public Health; Water Quality; and Economic Fairness. Therefore, these paragraphs were expected to resonate most strongly with focus group participants. All three of these paragraphs made some points that farmers and consumers thought were compelling.

However, overall, both farmers and consumers pointed out concerns with at least some of the wording in all the paragraphs that none really resonated sufficiently to form the foundation of effective communication to help motivate support for farm policy reforms that could promote sustainable agriculture. There were several themes among participants’ concerns:

- A strong sense among both farmers and consumers that various words and terms in the paragraphs would confuse consumers unless clearly explained:

Farmers were concerned that consumers would be confused by ambiguous words and terms such as “sustainable” or “conventional agriculture” and others – and they were correct. Even consumers who voiced strong compassion for farmers had so little grasp of factors that influence farm economy or of federal farm policies and programs that they needed considerably more information than the paragraphs could provide to be intrigued by the information in most of them. Words or concepts that were especially foreign were:

- “Sprawl”
 - “Farms can serve as a frontline to control development”
 - “Federal farm policies”
 - “Industrial scale farming”
 - “Sustainable farming”
 - “Agribusiness”
 - “Non-point source of water pollution”
- Too little information **addressing what farmers and consumers thought were important barriers to sustainability** such as non-farm owners and corporate farms receiving government farm program payments.
 - **The focus in many of the paragraphs on solutions that are funded by government programs. This sounded** like “welfare” to some farmers. Some consumers focused on the cost of such programs.