
Increasing Agricultural Community Involvement in Regional Conservation Planning

Lessons from Landowners, Non-profit Organizations, Local Governments and Agency Staff

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Discussion and Recommendations

The results of the organizational and landowner interviews provide a base of information from which the barriers to agricultural community participation can be evaluated, and bridges to overcome those barriers can be created. The interviews will be distilled and the barriers will be discussed in order to gain a clear understanding of the issue and its causes. General and specific recommendations on how to approach and overcome the barriers will then be discussed in order to provide agency staff and other plan participants with a broad set of tools for engaging the agricultural community at any stage in the regional conservation planning process.

Barriers to Agricultural Community Participation in Conservation Planning

The overwhelming majority of landowners who participated in this study indicated that protection of natural landscapes and wildlife is important, and that wildlife habitat near their community is important for their quality of life. Therefore it should not be assumed that the agricultural community is against protecting wildlife and habitat. One landowner commented that many of the younger farmers in the area were “pro” environment, but were frustrated because they feel that they are continually painted as poor land stewards by the environmental community. Why, then, is the agricultural community so resistant to conservation plans if natural landscapes and wildlife are so important to them? The following barriers are the major disincentives to agricultural participation.

Government Mistrust

Organization representatives and landowners both indicated that mistrust of government agencies and staff is a major barrier to regional conservation planning collaboration. Wondolleck and Yaffee, in *Making Collaboration Work*, observed that, "Mistrust is a common barrier to any cooperative process and often results in a lack of support for collaboration"¹. Mistrust can result in skepticism about the motives behind the plans, which further propels opposition toward the plan and the agencies promoting the plan. This lack of trust is often focused on the government in general (local, state, and federal) and not necessarily any one specific agency or department. The following are the primary reasons for the mistrust:

- **Few established relationships between agency staff and the agricultural community.** According to the agricultural community, agency staffs have not made sufficient time to meet and build relationships with local landowners. Compounding this issue is the high rate of agency staff turnover on the local level, resulting in few lasting relationships.
- **Perception of regulatory agencies as an arm or extension of the environmental community.** Some in the agricultural community believe that the government and

¹ Wondolleck, J. and Yaffee, S. *Making Collaboration Work. Lessons From Innovation in Natural Resource Management.* Island Press, Washington, D.C. 2000.

environmental community are working together against the agricultural community. One landowner's perception was that the "ultimate goal of a conservation plan is to eventually make farming unprofitable so the land is sold in its entirety to and for public habitat use." Another perception within the agricultural community, according to interviews with organizations and landowners, is that the wildlife agencies consistently err on the side of the environmental community by making decisions based on inconclusive or incomplete data. The agencies are responsible for protecting the public trust (in this case, wildlife and habitat), and decisions must often be made in the absence of complete information due to timing and expense of further data collection. When decisions regarding wildlife and habitat are perceived to directly affect landowners' abilities to make a living, and if the agricultural community feels that the decisions have been made hastily or that the evidence does not support the decisions, then they are likely to feel as if the decision was made unfairly.

- **Historical perceived or actual wrongdoing** either from first hand experiences, local experiences (friend or family) or reported experiences either from the press, Farm Bureau or other agricultural organizations. The agricultural community is characterized by its communal nature. Stories of perceived agency wrongdoing are told and retold through publication and word of mouth. In this survey it was mentioned several times that there were "horror stories" resulting from involvement with wildlife agencies.

Miscommunication and Misinformation

Miscommunication and a lack of understanding about conservation planning were highlighted by the organizations interviewed as major barriers to participation. At one local Farm Bureau meeting questions arose about a specific aspect of an NCCP in progress in the area. When questioned when the last time a Fish and Wildlife Service or Department of Fish and Game representative had been to the Farm Bureau meeting to talk about the plan, one director said in his 15 years of participating in Farm Bureau meetings, never once had an agency representative spoken at one of their meetings. Had a relationship been established and in place, these Farm Bureau directors could have called on agency staff to talk to them about the issue at their next meeting.

When asked whether or not they were aware of any regional conservation plans occurring in their area, just over half of the landowners responded that they were aware. Considering that all of the counties in the study area are at some point in the process of developing a long-term, landscape-scale HCP or NCCP, it is somewhat surprising that nearly half of the landowners were not aware of the plan occurring in their area. Though this study cannot be used as a representative sample for the entire agricultural community in the focus counties, it does highlight a potential roadblock to the success of any plan. One should expect that a greater number of landowners would have heard about the conservation plans, especially plans that have already been in progress for several years.

Apparent from this study is the general lack of understanding of the motives, process and details of a conservation plan. The landowners indicated that they did not understand the

process of developing the plans, and it was apparent from the organization interviews that much of the details about how the plan would affect local operations were unknown. It seemed as if the interviewees had not made the connection that what the plan means on the ground for the individual landowner is determined through the plan development process and is not mandated from some external source.

Problems have also arisen related to public meetings. Comments were made about landowners feeling isolated or confused at stakeholder and public meetings by the use of unfamiliar technical, planning or legal terminology. In addition, any meeting held during the day will result in a very low attendance rate from the agricultural community. Most landowners work during daylight hours and, unlike agency staff, are not paid to go to meetings about conservation planning. For a landowner to go to a meeting during the day means that the landowner may be losing money through the cost of his or her time.

Restrictions on Land Use

A major disincentive for the agricultural community is the perception that involvement with agencies will result in interference in farm activities either through additional regulations, direct monetary costs, or indirect costs such as restrictions on what crops can be grown.

Impact on Land Values

The agricultural community repeatedly expressed concerns over the impacts of a conservation plan on land values. Many landowners and organizations indicated that they were concerned about decreases in land values more than they were concerned about possible increases.

Missing Incentives/Unclear Benefits

The overwhelming perception regarding incentives to participation is that there aren't any tangible benefits to be derived from the plans. The agricultural community sees the plans as a large set of requirements. Understandably, if all that is perceived are 'sticks without any carrots', then the agricultural community will not only avoid participating, but will take measures to resist the plans. Landowners also perceived that participation will require time [and therefore money] from them. Many landowners communicated that time and money are too scarce for them to willingly relinquish these resources without direct benefits.

Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

Although the barriers to agricultural community engagement in conservation planning pose a formidable challenge to conservation planners hoping to solicit agricultural involvement, they are barriers that can be overcome through strategic efforts, relationships, and creativity. This section identifies possible strategies to better engage the agricultural community, as identified through the organizational and landowner interviews and questionnaires.

Improve Outreach to the Agricultural Community

Proactive and consistent communication is crucial to involving the agricultural community. It is likely that any plan will face resistance if the purposes, process and potential impacts of the plan are unclear to the agricultural community. As one organizational interviewee put it, "The energy that bumps this around is misunderstanding." Publications received by farmers are often anti conservation and endangered species. Some of the publications also build and stoke fears by giving extreme or exaggerated examples from the past. To reduce fears and misconceptions, landowners need to have their concerns addressed in words and actions. Clear and consistent communication early in the process regarding the purpose of the plan, why it is needed, and how it will work, will help avoid conflicts later in the process. The agricultural community has expressed in the past that they feel the plans are forced upon them. The local, state, and federal agencies should frequently reiterate that each plan is a collaborative process, explain the roles of landowners and organizations, and how their involvement helps shape the plan. As landowners and organizations come and go throughout the development of the plan, it is important to return to the initial information stage to both educate newcomers and to remind all involved of the larger picture and purposes of the plan.

The history of mistrust between landowners and government agencies, in particular between the agricultural community and regulatory agencies, may in part be overcome by proactive communication techniques. Planning partners who can employ new methods of communication will be more successful at reaching the agricultural community. To improve communication, plan participants can take advantage of the following methods and suggestions when engaging the agricultural community.

Build Partnerships with Existing Networks

Strategic partnerships should be used wherever and whenever possible when dealing with the agricultural community. As one interviewee put it, the wildlife agencies "will always have problems [with the agricultural community], but this can be partly overcome by developing relationships with the local government and maintaining a low key agency presence." Each county has its own system of networks and established relationships within the agricultural community. For example, many of the committee and board members of the local Resource Conservation District (RCD) and Agricultural Commission are also Farm Bureau members. These same individuals have often served together on other committees and have existing relationships with the local county and city planners.

Landowners are used to working with RCDs and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). Sixty-five percent of landowners participating in this study had received some help from the local Agricultural Extension office, half had worked with the NRCS and slightly less than half with the local RCD. Though governmental agencies, the NRCS and local RCDs do not play a regulatory role. These agencies are responsible for providing support and resources, giving them more favor with landowners, and typically have working relationships already established with landowners, providing a platform to work from. According to the organizational

interviewees, involving RCDs, the Agricultural Commissioner, and their boards can help to increase landowner participation. Outreach and partnership building efforts with these organizations can help to give plan participants access to landowners and to disperse information about conservation planning throughout the agricultural community. These organizations have the ability to reach landowners on the ground, to explain the workings of a plan and address their questions and concerns.

One method of building partnerships is to ask organizations such as the NRCS or RCDs to periodically review and comment on the plan or parts of the plan that relate to the agricultural community. Other key players to involve are the local Agricultural Extension and county Agricultural Commission. By involving these organizations in plan review, plan participants can enhance information dissemination to the agricultural community via the agricultural organizations who work directly with landowners. Then when plan components are circulated for public review, the agricultural community will already have seen and commented on the areas of their concern and will likely be more accepting of the plan because their input was sought and incorporated.

Through the interviews it became clear that many of the concerns of the agricultural community could be diffused through awareness of their concerns, increased communication, and education. A very effective but underutilized means of communication is direct contact with the agricultural community. Plan participants should focus on building relationships with the local agricultural groups, such as the Farm Bureau and grower associations. The local Farm Bureau, RCD, Agricultural Commission, and growers associations all have established monthly meetings. These meetings present the perfect opportunity for plan participants to directly reach a large portion of the agricultural community to talk about the plan and answer any questions that they have. Meeting them on their turf and at their time will help increase the potential for future dialog as well as show the planning partners' commitment to involving agriculture in the plan. Contacting growers associations and the local Farm Bureau will reach a large audience as the majority of landowners belong to one or both of these groups.

One organization that the plan participants should appeal to is the Agriculture Education Foundation.² This foundation runs a two-year fellowship called the Agricultural Leadership Program. Thirty individuals with an agriculture background participate in the two-year fellowship and are trained in leadership and issues that have an impact on agriculture. Currently there are over 1,000 graduates of this program in the state. Involving these graduates in the conservation planning dialogue could be a significant resource for the plan participants because the graduates come from the agricultural community, are trained in economics and politics, and are also more aware of the purposes of environmental protection laws and pressures on regulatory agencies than is the typical lay person.

² For more information visit the Agriculture Education Foundation website at www.agleaders.org

Employ Multiple Methods of Communication

Periodic newsletters, public meetings and in-person visits from plan representatives were ranked highest among the most effective methods of communicating to the agricultural community. Though nearly 2/3 of the landowners surveyed had access to the internet and email, web sites and email newsletters were the least preferred methods of communication. In addition, more than half of the respondents said that meetings in the evening were preferred over meetings held during the day.

Nearly 40 percent of landowners participating in this study said that they thought that a personal visit from plan representatives would be an effective means of communication. Where possible, meetings with landowners should occur outside of plan stakeholder meetings, to listen to concerns and talk with landowners about the benefits of participation. Though this takes effort and time, the result will be stronger relationships and a foundation from which to build a conservation plan that will have broader support.

When initiating communication, agencies should contact key individuals and begin building relationships with them first. Local Farm Bureau presidents and directors, RCD directors, and landowners that are either in the public eye or are in some way interested in conservation issues will more likely be open to meeting with plan representatives. These initial meetings can be a source of future contacts as these individuals are connected with the rest of the agricultural community.

If conservation plan representatives want agricultural landowners to participate, meetings should be scheduled during the evening rather than the daytime. Though this might inconvenience planning staff, it is unrealistic to ask farmers to forego their daily operations and activities to participate in a voluntary conservation planning effort. Several of the organizational representatives recalled midday regional agricultural meetings where the only agricultural representatives were organizations and not a single farmer was able to attend. Organizational representatives commented that their success at involving the agricultural community is partly because their meetings are held when farmers are available.

Focus on Public Relations

Some landowners in this study perceive that their livelihood could be threatened by the initiation of a plan and feel they are protecting themselves when they resist the plan. One of the key elements to communication on any level is to know your audience. William Ury, in *Getting Past No*, suggested that in order to create the right climate for problem solving, one must do the opposite of what the other side expects of you. He suggests that people with differing positions will expect each other to behave like adversaries. To promote a problem-solving climate, participants should be open and listen carefully to each other, acknowledge their points and their feelings, agree on common values, and always show each other respect.³ To accomplish this, plan representatives would benefit from training in conflict resolution, negotiation and collaboration. These skills will equip

³ Ury, William. *Getting Past No*. Bantam Books, New York, 1993.

participants to see the collaborative process through, avoid negotiation breakdown, and will help guide the process in a more effective way.

Organizational interview respondents said that plan representatives should be aware that language can have a profound effect on landowners. Legal and planning lingo should be avoided when addressing landowners. Though many landowners are aware of the plans, plan representatives should not expect them to know all of the terms and acronyms that staff uses as day-to-day language. In one instance, changing the title of the conservation plan to wording that was more appealing to agricultural interests "solved 30% of the problem."

Several of the non-profit organizations commented that plan representatives should be aware of the pressures that agriculture faces, and communicate with those pressures in mind. Landowners might be focused on their harvest, worried about wardens coming on to their land, worried about water quality regulation and runoff, or worried about endangered species regulation that might come about through the plan. Though some apprehensions may be unrealistic, many are based on experience. One example given in the interviews was an instance where a biologist left a gate open after making a site visit, which resulted in lost livestock. As one non-profit director stated, "Looking at their attitudes divorced from their concerns doesn't take into account the whole picture."

Provide Examples From Other Plans and Experiences

Giving examples of what conservation plans have meant to agriculture in other areas, especially how they impacted daily farm practices, would be helpful in sidestepping barriers that arise due to preconceived perceptions. Landowners are mainly concerned about what the plan will mean to their operation. Hearing a positive experience from a landowner in another region may help interest them in participating in a plan in their area. On an organizational level, inviting agricultural organizations that have collaborated in other plans to speak about the process, its benefits and its drawbacks also has the potential to inspire organizations in the current planning area to collaborate.

Having local landowners who have engaged in conservation activities talk with other landowners in the area about their experiences with habitat or wildlife protection, the Endangered Species Act, and conservation easements can help to increase the local agricultural community's engagement in conservation planning. Direct farmer-to-farmer communication provides information and insights to landowners who have not engaged in conservation efforts from someone they can relate to. Site visits and discussions about the habitat conservation planning process, potentially facilitated by a host landowner, could be a valuable resource for conservation planners.

Focus on Education

One landowner insightfully commented that "What people do not understand they do not want a part of." Therefore, explanation should be provided in early informational meetings on which data are needed, what they will be used for and how landowners might be affected. Basic information about what species are proposed to be covered, and why, should also be included in these meetings. Landowners might be willing to alter

their agricultural practices if they can see the link between their agricultural practices and harm to the species, or conversely how their practices could be modified to aid conservation. Specific topics that should also be explained are:

- Safe Harbor agreements
- Conservation easements
- Impacts of conservation areas on land values
- Possible effects from species and habitat conservation and management
- Good neighbor provisions
- Purposes of stakeholder and technical committees
- What makes a good mitigation site
- How landowners can get involved

Emphasize Commonalities

Landowners and organizations both indicated that they are very concerned about urban development and the loss of agriculture in their counties. According to Wondolleck and Yaffee, "Many successful initiatives have sought common ground by focusing on shared problems."⁴ The most obvious common ground that the agricultural community shares with wildlife agencies and environmentalists is that urban growth and development can take agricultural land out of production and threaten wildlife and its habitat. Agencies want to see open space and habitat, and the landowners want to be able to stay in production. As the large majority of landowners commented in this study, agricultural productivity and habitat protection can be compatible activities. This should be a focal point for the plan participants when approaching the agricultural community.

Create Incentives to Participate

Landowners perceive there to be a lack of incentives for their involvement in conservation planning. One organizational interviewee gave the perspective that landowners come to the table for two reasons: 1) the plan participants are making decisions about their land, and 2) the plan is a potential mechanism for regulatory relief. The latter reason was only given by one of the interviewees, whereas the former was given by several interviewees as the main reason why landowners would participate. What appears to be missing for landowners and organizations is the appropriate balance of 'sticks and carrots'.

Currently, fear of Endangered Species Act (ESA) regulation has left some landowners feeling as if the most self-protective action they could take is to remove the species or habitat before it is found and regulation is imposed. One landowner commented that one of the reasons why people do "clean farming", which is the removal of all vegetation to the property line, is so that they will not have ESA "problems." If landowners were to remove threatened or endangered species or their habitat, the result would be a felony offense under the Endangered Species Act. Many landowners believe that ESA regulation will require them to change their practices and consequently incur some degree of cost, thus motivating them to do clean farming. Landowners would be more receptive to

⁴ Wondolleck, J. and Yaffee, S. *Making Collaboration Work. Lessons From Innovation in Natural Resource Management*. Island Press, Washington, D.C. 2000.

participating in conservation plans if there were assurances that ongoing farm practices were protected. Since the California Fish and Game Code provides these assurances⁵, communicating to the agricultural community that ongoing practices are protected should be a high priority.

In addition to these assurances, if the incentive structure was such that the presence of the habitat or a species would result in monetary compensation for the landowner, then it is likely that most landowners would be open to participation and would make efforts to protect or promote the species or habitat.

Financial viability and the ability to continue farming are most landowners' primary concerns. Combining conservation with the landowners' needs to be financially independent would likely show dramatic increases in support for the plans. Roughly 75% of landowners believe that they will have to change their practices in the future because of financial pressures, which suggests that they would respond positively to financial incentives. One landowner commented:

"The primary concerns of most farmers are taking care of the family, staying in business, keeping the farm in good shape, and so on. If habitat is going to break in to the top five, then there need to be economic incentives. Farmers can't even afford cost share programs. EQUIP⁶ costs money every time. If it can't be profitable to do habitat conservation (for example if EQUIP was 120% of the costs) no one will play. Everyone would play if it was."

Many of the interviewees communicated that conservation plans would be more acceptable if they contained provisions that look like something that is already familiar to landowners. For example, if the plans, as they affect landowners, resemble how the Williamson Act works, then it is likely that they would be better accepted. The example given was that if landowners received a tax break that could be renewed every 10-15 years, then they might be more willing to participate in the plan. In regards to easements, the option of either a one-time payment or annual payments should be available to appeal to landowners' preferences, though it was unclear from the interviews why this would make a significant difference.

Over half of the landowners interviewed thought that their business could benefit by being certified as wildlife friendly. If landowners participate in a conservation plan and take steps to develop habitat or protect species, then it is possible that some of the costs incurred could be passed on to consumers through higher market premiums as a result of

⁵ California Fish and Game Code sections 2086-2089. Available from: <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/calawquery?codesection=fgc>

⁶ This landowner was referring to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQUIP) reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill) and is administered by the Natural Resource Conservation Service. EQUIP is a cost share program that pays up to 75% of costs incurred through the implementation of conservation practices. For more information see: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/>.

a certification program similar to the organic certification program. A third party certification and promotion mechanism would add to the credibility of the program.

Celebrate Success

Communicating success stories is one way to motivate stakeholders to continue their involvement. Successes also remind those involved that the plan is progressing and that the process is working. Successes could be as small as recognizing mutual interests that were stated in a goals or mission statement, and as large as successfully negotiated agreements between typically adversarial parties. As mentioned earlier, landowners from other areas could be brought in to describe the impacts and benefits of a conservation plan on their operations. Bringing in local farmers to talk about their positive experiences with conservation easements, habitat conservation, and endangered species could also be helpful in communicating successes.

Small successes should be pursued first. The creation of milestones can be used to track the progress of the plan, and the completion of milestones will remind stakeholders that their involvement is important and productive. Stakeholders who feel they are wasting their time become less motivated and may ultimately disengage from the process making the final goal more difficult to reach. Celebrating success with press releases, public commendations, and social gatherings publicly acknowledges the group's hard work, sacrifices, and accomplishments.

Further Study

Several unresolved issues that came up many times during the course of this study could not be adequately addressed due to the limited scope and time frame of this project. These issues are presented here in order to acknowledge that they are important to the agricultural community, and are therefore valuable topics for conservation planners to address.

In this study, 83% of landowners said that urban growth and development was the number one land use planning issue facing agriculture in their area, and 92% said they were concerned about the loss of agriculturally productive land in their county. Agricultural organizations and landowner associations have communicated in the past their resistance to conservation easements because the reduced tax base affects the local community. In a 1999 "Ag Alert" from the California Farm Bureau Federation, President Bill Pauli said, "Our experience in California...is that they [HCPs] are tools for encouraging urban sprawl, and magnify the loss of good farmland by forcing productive land into public habitat preserves."⁷

However, several interviewed landowners made it clear that as soon as their land is more profitable to sell to a developer than it is to farm, they will sell the land. Agency staff have communicated their frustration about what appear to be conflicting motives from the agricultural community regarding the selling of farmland for urban type development and

⁷ For the complete article see the Ag Alert archives on the web at <http://www.cfbf.com/agalert/1996-00/1999/aa-1027a.htm> (Accessed September 2003).

keeping farmland in production. Several of the organizations interviewed acknowledged that though some agricultural organizations say that they are concerned about the loss of productive land, farmland is ultimately what is being sold to development. One interviewee commented, "Every landowner in the western half of the county has been approached by developers. Why would landowners get involved in permanent conservation if it precludes possible sales?" The following topics should be studied in order to address these and other perceptions of the agricultural community.

Economic Impacts of a Conservation Plan

As mentioned above, one major concern that is continually reiterated is the effect of conservation plans, habitat restoration, conservation areas and conservation easements on the economics of a community or region. Better knowledge of the economic impacts of regional conservation plans on local communities would clear up the confusion surrounding this perception.

Conservation Plans and the Rate of Development

Another claim from the agricultural community is that regional conservation plans encourage urban development. Before- and after- comparisons of urban development rates and conversion of farmland to urban land uses should be studied in order to address this perception.

Conservation Plans and Property Values

Apprehension toward conservation plans due to potential property value increases and/or decreases arose during this study. There is a lot of confusion regarding whether or not values will increase or decrease, and the implications of those changes. Looking at the effect of a regional conservation plan on land values will provide agencies with the means of addressing this question.

Conclusion

Overcoming the barriers of agricultural involvement in conservation planning will be a formidable challenge for plan participants in the years and decades to come. However, once the bridges have been built, it is likely that wildlife advocates will find their strongest allies within the agricultural community. Conservation planners and the agricultural community have a lot to gain by partnering with one another. Awareness of the perspectives and concerns of the agricultural community is the first step to building a lasting partnership. The observations, methods, and suggestions presented here can help to initiate and foster relationships in which mutual goals, understanding and cooperation drive the process.