Against the Grain: Agri-Environmental Reform in the United States and the European Union

Potter describes and compares the process of agricultural policy reform within US and Europe over the past three decades. The book describes the environmental consequences of policy and political processes, and reflects on what environmental achievements have been gained. In doing so, Potter’s study reveals just how difficult it is to effectively target, monitor and evaluate environmental policies. In the case of early US soil conservation measures, the allocation of subsidies reflected farmer up-take rather than the soil erosion threat. Perhaps more significantly, subsidies for soil conservation were never sufficient to outweigh the commercial incentive for farmers “to put highly erodible land under highly erosive crops” (Potter, 1998, p. 40). Subsequent policy developments have been more clearly focused on conservation outcomes, and separated from farming. They show that policy objectives need to be clearly targeted in accord with the objectives that they are intended to achieve.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the development of productionist agricultural policies and practices since World War II, and their damaging environmental consequences, and the gradual build-up of pressures for reform. Chapter 2 describes the pressures for reform in more detail. Chapter 3 looks at the reform process in the US leading up to and beyond the enactment of the Farm Security Act Conservation Title in 1985. Potter notes that “the retargeting of the Conservation Reserve Program from a narrow focus on highly erodible land in the early sign-ups to a broader embrace of ‘environmentally sensitive lands’ in the later ones, illustrates the way the policy adapted to changing public priorities” (p. 81).

Chapters 4 and 5 look at reforms in UK and their modification and adoption by the wider European community. A program in the UK which promises to grow in importance in the future is the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, which offers farmers a menu of management options varied according to location and landscape type. Farmers are encouraged to make a selection from the menu and put together their own proposals for managing any land to be put into the scheme. According to Potter, current views among conservation groups in England are that the Countryside Stewardship Scheme provided better value for money than its major alternative, the Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme.

Chapter 6 analyses the implication of the GATT/World Trade Organisation talks, and the pressures and prospects for agri-environmental strategies. It assesses how far the scaling down of price supports and ‘decoupling’ of public subsidies from production is likely to benefit the environment. It compares the US and European arguments for retaining some form of government support to agriculture on environmental grounds.

Chapter 7 reflects on the achievements gained by the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, and suggests why agri-environmental policy is likely to remain a feature of the rural policy scene. It notes the arguments of both critics and supporters of the schemes, and concludes that:

- There is a need for development of environmental performance standards and indicators to identify and set targets for environmental subsidies.
- There is a need to develop better accountability measures (administrative and monitoring procedures) to ensure that public funds toward
agri-environmental aims are achieving what they are intended to achieve.

- There is a need to search for policy measures that will encourage member states with less developed environmental concerns to implement the latest agri-environmental Regulation in the fashion for which the Regulation is intended.
- There is a need to develop policy measures that will encourage a shift in farmer attitudes toward conservation as much as a shift in behaviour.

This is an extremely rewarding book if the reader is determined enough to keep going. It provides a very thorough overview of agricultural and agri-environmental policies and their environmental effects in Europe and the US. In doing so, it reveals some of the consequences for policy of the different philosophies and values that underlie the different approaches. While Americans separate ‘wilderness’ from ‘countryside’ and have viewed the environmental consequences of agriculture largely from the viewpoint of its physical and biological effects (on soil erosion and water quality), the Europeans make no such clear distinctions. Their concern with countryside and environmental protection encompasses both biological and social consequences of agricultural practice. These different valuations of countryside have resulted in different environmental incentives and a different policy development process. But both the American and European policy approaches have experienced similar difficulties in implementing their environmental protection methods. While the difficulties have been reduced over time, as suggested by Potter, much remains to be done to ensure that policies achieve their intended environmental effects.

The bibliography, with more than 400 references, is a useful directory to key sources of information. These sources extend till 1997, and include government documents such as reports to the US Congress, reports of the UK Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and agricultural publications of the European Union.

Several features make this a difficult book to read. The aims of the book are not clearly and succinctly stated and there is no clear statement of conclusions. The overall structure of the book is repetitive, rambling, and unclear. The key points of each chapter are difficult to identify. This reviewer frequently wondered: what is this section trying to say? What are the main points of this chapter? Is anything different being said in this chapter from that said in earlier pages? Over 80 acronyms are used, including such obscure examples as Universal Soil Loss Equation (USLE), Nitrogen Advisory Area (NAA), Nitrogen Sensitive Area (NSA) and Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (NSCGP). The necessity of turning to the list of abbreviations to identify these acronyms slows down a reading of the book and considerably adds to the effort of understanding what the author is trying to say.

It is not clear who is the intended readership. If the intended readers are policy makers, then the writing style is likely to deter all but the most dedicated. If the intended readership is academic, then many of the people who could benefit from a reading of the book (because of its detailed assessment of the practical environmental effects of policy) are likely to miss it.

Overall, the book provided valuable insights into a number of different policy issues concerning environmental protection within agricultural landscapes. Despite the effort involved, it was a worthwhile read.

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A number of disciplines concerned with systems analysis from ecology (Hollings, 1986) to computer programming (Kelley, 1985) have focused much attention and debate on the nature of complex systems, supporting the idea that some degree of flexibility is required to absorb shocks and thus allow for more sus-