

Farmer Perspectives of Government Regulations: Benefits, Challenges and Opportunities

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Background

Throughout New England, farmers face regulations across a wide range of areas in the agrifood system. From environmental to labor to economic policies, these rules are administered and regulated by many different agencies. Recent years have seen a number of new large policies introduced nationally and in Vermont, including the Required Agricultural Practices (RAPs) and the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). Given these changes, this research explores farmer's perceptions of regulations, perceived benefits and challenges, and potential opportunities for policy and regulatory issues.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through farmer interviews and online surveys. Farmers were recruited for interviews via the Vermont Agency of Agriculture's publication AgriView, through Cooperative Extension, and via farmer list serves. Fifteen farmers were interviewed and compensated \$50 for their time. Surveys were conducted at various conferences in winter 2018. In addition, online surveys were conducted via list serves such as the Beef Producers Association, The Farm Bureau, and through advertisements in AgriView between April and July 2018. In total, 73 farmers responded to the survey, and were eligible for one of 10 randomly chosen prizes for \$50. Survey responses were analyzed using statistical methods and qualitative analysis for open-ended responses.

88 number of farmers participating in the research.

Key Descriptive Results

Respondents

Farmer respondents produced a variety of crops, animals, and products on their farms. Respondents most commonly reported producing at least one of the following: dairy (32%), beef cattle (29%), vegetables (29%), fruit or fruit trees (25%), berries (23%), corn or row crops (23%), maple (23%), and pasture (23%). In addition:

- 71% of respondents were from Vermont, while other respondents reported farming in New York, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut.
- 16.4% of farmers were certified organic in some capacity.
- Respondents reported that the principal farm operator was most commonly the individual responsible for paperwork and government reporting.
- 70% of farmers reported that farming is their full time occupation, with a mean of 38% of their income coming from off the farm.
- 60% of farmers identified that they had a succession plan for their farm.
- Farmer respondents reported a mean age of 54 years old, with 70% identifying as male and 29% identifying as female.

Farmer Perceptions of Changes in Regulations

Legend: Significantly decreased (dark brown), Decreased (orange), Stayed the Same (yellow), Increased (light blue), Significantly increased (dark blue), Not sure (grey)

The number of government regulations in the past five years has...



The level of complexity of government regulation in the past five years has...



The number of farm visits/audits from government regulators in the past five years has...



Farmer Perceptions of Federal Regulations

Strongly disagree Disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Agree Strongly agree Not sure

I feel confident that I know how to comply with federal regulations



I feel certain about how federal regulations will affect my farm



The federal regulatory environment is steady and predictable



The cost to comply with federal regulations is reasonable



Farmer Perspectives on Regulations

Survey respondents were asked about changes in regulations over time and their impact on farms.

- 84% of farmers reported a increase in regulations in the past five years. (53.1% significantly increased, 33.1% increased)
- 83% of farmers felt that regulatory complexity had increased in the last five years (44.6% significantly increased, 38.5% increased).

Our results suggest that farmer’s largely had similar views on both state and federal policies and processes. They feel confident in compliance but uncertain about changes and cost challenges.

- Almost 61% of farmers agreed and strongly agreed that they felt confident in complying with both state and federal regulations.
- 34.9% and 30.4% of respondents stated that they feel certain to some extent about how state and federal regulations, respectively, will impact their farm.
- Finally, cost was cited as a barrier or challenge within the surveys, as 22% of farmers stated that the cost to comply with both state and federal policies was reasonable.

More than 60% of farmers felt confident with compliance, but only 22% of farmers felt costs were reasonable

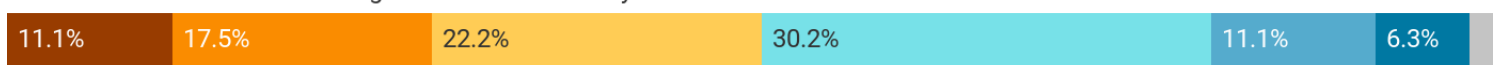
Farmer Perceptions of State Regulations

Strongly disagree Disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Agree Strongly agree Not sure

I feel confident that I know how to comply with state regulations



I feel certain about how state regulations will affect my farm



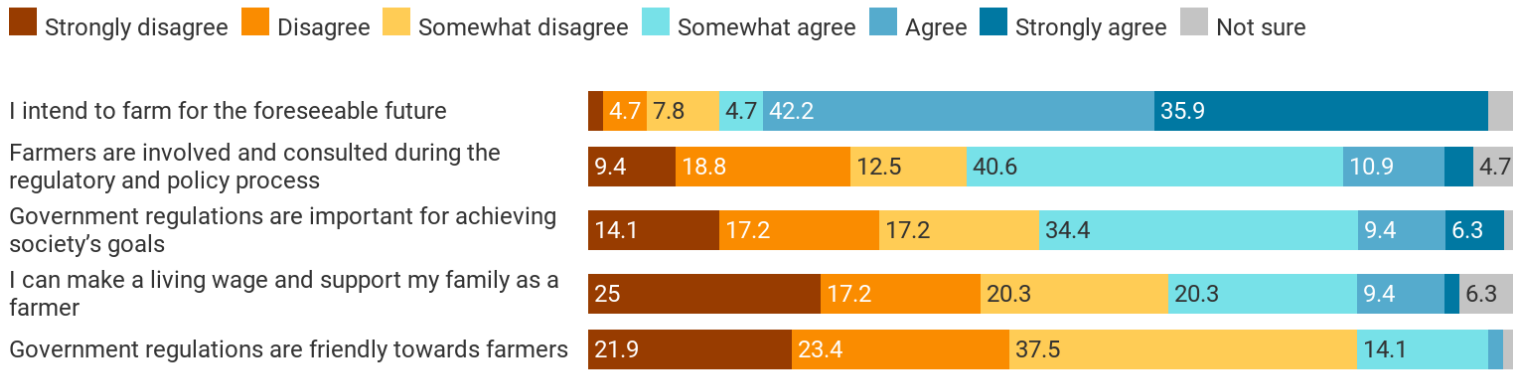
The state regulatory environment is steady and predictable



The cost to comply with state regulations is reasonable



Farming and Regulations



Farmers reported on society and government's impact on the state of their farm.

- Despite indicated challenges with regulations, almost 83% of farmers stating that they agree or strongly agree that they intend to continue to farm in the foreseeable future.
- 82.8% of farmers felt that government regulations were not friendly towards farmers; yet, half of respondents shared that regulations are important to achieve goals as society as a whole.
- 31.3% of farmers agreed that they are able to make a livable wage from their farming operation.

83% of farmers intend to farm for the foreseeable future

Regulatory Breadth

Survey respondents discussed 22 specific regulations ranging from municipal, state, to federal level policies. Table 1 outlines the five most commonly discussed policy types. It should be noted that the most frequently discussed policy, the Required Agricultural Practices (RAPs), is a regulation in the state of Vermont.

Table 1. The five most frequently listed regulations

Regulation	Scale	Administering Body	Mentions
Required Agricultural Practices (RAPs)	State	Vermont Agency of Agriculture	35
Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)	Federal	Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) – Food and Drug Administration (FDA)	11
Organic Food Production Act	Federal	United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)	10
Federal Meat Inspection Act	Federal	USDA	8
Farm Bill	Federal	USDA	5

Table 2. Total number policy types mentioned

Policy Category	Total Mentions
Environment	50
Food Safety	24
Economics/Financial	7
Labor	5
Viticulture	2
Healthcare	1

Environmental policies (e.g. focus on land, water quality, climate, or soil) were most commonly mentioned by farmers. Food safety (e.g. FSMA, HACCP, food inspections, animal transportation regulations) were the second most commonly cited regulation, followed by economic and financial policies, which surround the regulation of production insurance and taxes. Labor policies were mentioned five times, regarding regulation of migrant work and employees. Lastly, viticulture policies (such as specific regulations impacting the production and retailing of wine products) and healthcare (e.g. the Affordable Care Act) were mentioned least.

Perceived Benefits

When asked about the benefits of government regulations, respondents reported a variety of benefits ranging from on and off the farm. Farmers reported the main benefits to regulations were improved environmental quality; enhanced health and safety for farm workers, consumers, and society; and more awareness and confidence of agricultural practices across communities.

"Regulations have made farmers better land managers"

-Vermont Farmer

Perceived Challenges & Opportunities

Farmers were asked about challenges and barriers they faced surrounding government regulations that impacted their farm. The most commonly stated challenges to comply with policies are associated with the economic cost associated with changing practices, farmer education of the regulations, and disconnect between government officials and farmers. Many farmers expressed that they didn't know how to participate in the process, or were not heard in the process.

"Regulations change frequently and often are stricter and harder to afford implementation without significant cost and/or loss of efficiency"

- Vermont Farmer

Respondents shared potential changes they would like to see within the regulatory system to make compliance more accessible. The most common opportunities included simplification of regulations, input from farmers when making regulatory decisions, improved communication, better economic opportunities, and increased science-driven policy.

"[There's] a long list of changes.. but primarily I'd like to see science based research and trial data to support any new regulations"

- Vermont Farmer

"I would like farmers to have more access and involvement in the discussion of the regulations to come up with common sense solutions"

-Vermont Farmer

Policy Implications

- Despite the perceived increase in number and complexity of regulations, the majority of farmers surveyed intend to continue to farm in the foreseeable future.
- Farmers most significant policy challenges include regulatory certainty, cost, administrative capacity (e.g. paperwork), participation, and knowing who to reach out to for questions.
- Farmers suggest opportunities for improvement include communication and technical assistance, simplification of regulations, economic opportunities accompanying regulations, and science-driven policies.

Future Research

Future research of a similar fashion could be expanded into other regions facing similar federal, but different state regulations, and work with farmers over time to understand more specifically how policies are implemented and what benefits and challenges they experience. Further complementary research could document all existing state and federal policies and analyze the paperwork and other regulatory reporting required across different policy structures.

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