

Agricultural priorities among Colorado ranchers and farmers

John Brouillette and David Rogers^{1/}

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Quick Facts

In a recent survey of Colorado farm operators and ranchers, respondents were asked to indicate what priorities the legislature should give to a variety of programs, what research topics should receive highest priority and who should provide major sources of funds for agricultural research.

To better understand which farm operators gave high ranking to which items, the study compared responses of large vs. small farm operations.

Irrigation efficiency	75
Control soil erosion	74
Low water use crops	73
Control/eradicate pests	70
Alternative marketing arrangements	69
Improve livestock productivity	61
Impact of growth/decline on rural communities	55
Delivery of rural services	40

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90
Percent

Figure 2: Priority each program should have as a research topic (percent ranking program as first or second).

In a recent survey of Colorado farm operators and ranchers, respondents were asked to indicate priorities for several potential issues within the state legislature, for agricultural research programs and for four of the Colorado State University Extension Service programs. Each of these priority areas is discussed below.

Respondents were asked what priority, from first to fifth, the state legislature should give to a variety of programs. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents who ranked each as either first or second priority. Four programs received more than 50 percent first or second place votes. More than four-fifths (84 percent) of

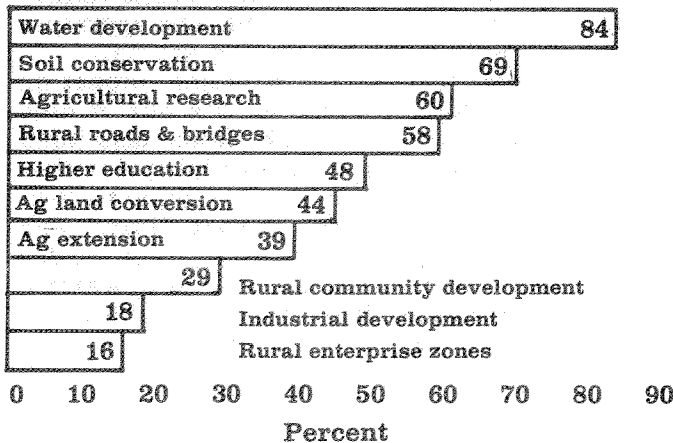


Figure 1: Priority the state legislature should give to various programs (percent ranking program first or second).

the respondents felt that water development should receive first or second priority. This was followed by soil conservation (69 percent), agricultural research (60 percent) and rural roads and bridges (58 percent). Programs receiving the lowest number of first or second priority votes were rural enterprise zones (16 percent) and industrial development (18 percent).

Farm operators were asked what research topics should receive highest priority. The largest percentage of respondents gave first or second priority to methods for improved irrigation efficiency (75 percent), methods for controlling soil erosion (74 percent) and development of low-water-use crops (73 percent). A majority of respondents ranked all the items as first or second priority, except for methods to improve delivery of services to rural communities. The high overall ranking of these items suggests a major commitment to all the research topics investigated. See Figure 2.

The farm operators also were asked what their priorities were for the major program areas of the CSU Extension Service. Figure 3 shows that over two-fifths of the respondents felt that all four extension programs should have first or second priority. This demonstrates that farm operators felt that all four programs were important. More

^{1/} John Brouillette, CSU associate professor, and David Rogers, CSU professor, both department of sociology (4/1/83)

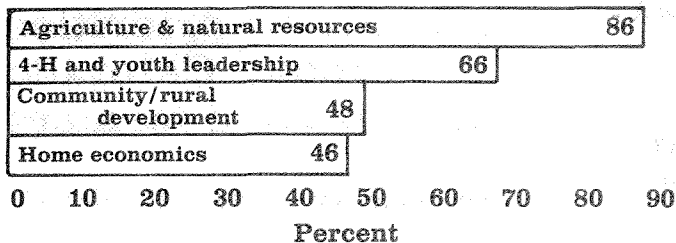


Figure 3: Priority CSU extension programs should have (percent ranking program first or second).

than three-fourths ranked agriculture and natural resources as their first or second priority (86 percent) and 4-H and youth leadership received the next largest number of first or second place votes (66 percent).

When asked who should provide the major source of funds for agricultural research, 39 percent felt federal taxes should provide most of the funding. This was followed by agricultural producers (24 percent), state taxes (15 percent) and private industry (12 percent). The remainder of the respondents mentioned private industry along with combinations of public and private support.

The responses suggest a preference for spreading the cost of agricultural research over a wide range of groups and to continue public support. Agricultural research benefits the consumer through lower prices and better quality; therefore, farm operators apparently want consumers to help finance agricultural research. Other operators may feel that since they benefit directly from research, they should carry most of the cost.

To better understand which farm operators gave high ranking to which items, the study compared responses of large vs. small farm operations, full-time farmers with those employed full-time off the farm, single-family farms vs. partnerships and corporate-owned farms, and farms with high and low farm sales.

Other studies have shown that farmers differ markedly from each other when asked to take positions on various issues. The data showed that some basis exists for this fact among the respondents. The size of a farm as measured in acres operated made a difference in three out of ten state-level priorities. It affected the priority assigned to roads and bridges, water development and agricultural extension. The largest support for roads and bridges was among farmers who operate and manage large farms. This was especially obvious when comparing farms of less than 50 acres with farms of more than 1,000 acres. The strongest support for water development came from operators of farms smaller than 500 acres. Agricultural extension was ranked higher by operators of farms under 180 acres.

Employment conditions and ownership structure affected priority rankings only on roads and bridges. Here, the full-time farm operator rated roads and bridges higher than the operator who works full-time off the farm. Those on corporate farms also rated roads and bridges

higher than those from either single-family or partnership operations.

Finally, the amount of farm sales was associated with farm operator positions on three priorities: roads and bridges, soil conservation and agricultural extension. Farmers with sales of \$50,000 or more gave roads and bridges a higher priority than farmers with lower sales. Farmers producing less than \$10,000 gave soil conservation and agricultural extension greater priority than did farmers with sales of \$50,000 or more.

As with the ranking of state legislative issues, the characteristics of farm operations also influenced research priorities. Farm size was associated with two research areas: analysis of the impact of population growth or decline in rural communities and methods to improve irrigation efficiency. Priorities assigned to the remaining research topics did not vary with the size of the farm. High priority was assigned to methods for reducing the impact of population changes in rural communities and methods to improve irrigation efficiency were rated high by small farm operators.

Commitment to farming as a full-time occupation also influences research priorities. Farm owners working part-time off the farm ranked higher the carrying capacity of range land, the development of low-water-use crops and livestock productivity than did full-time operators and full-time off-the-farm owners. The lowest priority given to these topics was by operators who are employed full-time on the farm.

In contrast to those low rankings, full-time farm operators ranked methods for improving the delivery of community services higher than did part-time operators or those working full-time off the farm.

Ownership structure was associated only with methods for increasing the carrying capacity of range land. Here, the single-family operator ranked it higher than did farm operators from partnership or corporate operations.

Farm sales volume had a major impact on research priorities, influencing six out of nine topics. Farm operations with sales less than \$10,000 ranked the following as high priorities: capacity of range land, population impacts, low-water-use crops, livestock productivity and irrigation efficiency. Farms with sales of \$50,000 or more ranked alternative marketing arrangements higher than did partnerships or corporate operators.

The Sample

Mail questionnaires were sent to 2,520 randomly selected Colorado farm operators. Of the 2,129 delivered questionnaires, 1,123 were returned for a response rate of about 53 percent. The study's margin of error is three percent. *More information on the methods and data from this study are available from the authors.*