



Promoting ethanol in rural Kansas: Local framings and cultural politics



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore how local promoters framed the development of the ethanol industry in Kansas, in the Midwestern U.S., by attaching it to locally salient discourses related to the environment, economic development, energy independence, and the cultural importance of agricultural production. We use a framing analysis to examine the discourse and cultural politics of the promotion of ethanol production in four regional and one state level newspaper, supplemented by data from key informant interviews conducted to understand how both the promises and the impacts of the ethanol industry are reframed at the local level. We argue that by linking ethanol production to localized economic and environmental benefits, and to national security and energy independence agendas, the discourse promoting biofuels development in the local media sidelined any discussion of climate mitigation or conservation agendas associated with biofuels production, and reframed natural resource issues to justify local claims for continued water mining for agricultural production. In particular, water use in biofuels production is naturalized as an entitlement for agriculture and ethanol producers. Our research adds to the rural studies literature that examines how powerful discourses and ideologies interact to advance an agenda that may actually be counter to economic and environmental futures in rural communities.

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"[Ethanol] is good for our rural economies, good for our environment and good for our state and nation, [former Kansas Governor] Sebelius said."

(Staatz, 2007)

"The promise of the bioeconomy is in part realized through the creation of green collar jobs — jobs involved with the production of bioproducts and biofuels — for Kansans, especially those in rural areas."

Former Kansas Secretary of Agriculture Adrian Polansky, 2008

1. Introduction

The ethanol industry in the U.S. emerged in the mid-2000s, promoted to mitigate the effects of climate change, increase energy independence, and bring economic development to declining rural areas. The agriculturally-dominated Midwestern U.S., where the consolidation and industrialization of low-value commodity agriculture had contributed to declining rural economies during

the 1980s and 1990s, was primed for the new opportunities that the ethanol industry presented (Johnson and Rathge, 2005). While evidence that the ethanol industry would actually create a substantial number of jobs and economic development in rural areas was limited, many state and local governments forged ahead with promoting the rural economic development potential of the industry (Lehrer, 2010; Bain, 2011).

In Kansas, the state with the third highest number of acres in agriculture in the U.S., state and local politicians, investors, and other stakeholders promoted the ethanol industry as the 'best fit' for the state's grain farmers, rural communities, and the economic development of the state. Key political and economic stakeholders emphasized both local economic and national energy independence benefits of ethanol in order to facilitate the establishment of biorefineries in rural communities. To bolster support, promoters of biofuels development stressed the importance of agriculture to the state's economy and identity, despite several decades of decline in agriculturally related jobs, rural depopulation, and a diminishing natural resource base.

In this paper, we explore how local promoters framed the development of the ethanol industry by attaching it to locally salient discourses related to the environment, rural economic development, national security and energy independence, and the

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cultural importance of agricultural production. This builds on the work of other scholars (Bell and York, 2010; Habermas, 1975; Sherman, 2009) who have shown how powerful actors pursue legitimation by using cultural manipulation to encourage individuals and communities to identify with industries that are not necessarily in their economic interests. Following Dryzek (2005), we understand discourse as a shared way of understanding the world that allows actors to put disparate information together to make coherent narratives. Key actors or stakeholders exercise power by imposing a particular frame or discourse on to a discussion (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). We examine the discourse and cultural politics surrounding biofuels in western Kansas through an analysis of the promotion of ethanol production in one state level and four regional newspapers. In addition, we draw on key informant interviews in rural communities in western Kansas conducted to understand perceptions of the promises and impacts of the ethanol industry at the local level. We argue that by linking ethanol production to localized economic and environmental benefits, and to national security and energy independence agendas, the discourse promoting biofuels development in the local media discounted any discussion of climate impacts and reframed natural resource issues to justify local claims for continued water mining for agricultural production.

In the next section, we outline recent rural studies literature that examines the cultural politics of rural economic and environmental change as well as literature that interrogates the discourse and framings of bioenergy development. Both literatures inform our analysis of how the emergence of the ethanol industry in rural Kansas is promoted in regional media. Following the literature review, we provide a brief historical background on the factors facilitating the development of the ethanol industry in western Kansas. A description of the methods and data used in this study is followed by our findings and a discussion of the implications of our case study.

2. Literature review

Recent rural studies literature in the U.S. explores the cultural politics that surround economic change in rural regions, a departure from much of the previous rural community studies literature. In the 1980s, U.S. rural sociology literature focused on the impacts of the farm crisis on rural communities and families (Brooks et al., 1986; Bultena et al., 1986; Dudley, 2002) and on community level vulnerabilities associated with rural resource dependent and extractive economies (Freudenburg, 1992; Freudenburg et al., 1995). Rural studies in the 1990s examined how economic restructuring and globalization were creating uneven development, resulting in outmigration and economic decline for many rural communities (Flora et al., 1992; Lyson and Falk, 1993; Lobao, 1996). The recognition that cultural factors play an important role in shaping communities led to a wave of research that demonstrates the importance of identity, values, and symbols to understanding trajectories of rural change (Buttel, 1996; Dupuis and Vandergeest, 1996).

Reflecting the 'cultural turn' in rural studies in the 2000s, this new scholarship gives more attention to investigating the role of discourse and culture in the construction of rural identities and survival strategies in the face of declining economic opportunities (Cloke, 2006; Panelli, 2006). In her ethnographic study of a declining former logging town in northern California, Jennifer Sherman (2009) focuses on how residents use moral discourses to cope with their situations. Moral discourses related to the importance of "family values" and "hard work" regulate behavior in this small rural community, and are a source of distinction and stratification among residents who are all equally poor and lacking in

opportunities. She demonstrates that survival strategies in declining rural communities are often chosen because they are socially and culturally acceptable rather than economically optimal.

Recent work by Bell and York (2010) and Scott (2010) examine why rural mining communities support destructive mining practices even though they realize that mining is eroding their livelihoods, destroying the environment, and undermining their landscape and sense of place. Bell and York (2010) show how local elites in the coal industry in West Virginia successfully appropriate cultural icons to convince residents of the importance of the coal industry to community economic well-being and identity, despite declining job availability and benefits from the industry. Additionally, they highlight the role that ideology and legitimation play in maintaining elite rule through persuasively attaching community economic identity to the extractive industry.

Scott (2010) also examines why rural residents tolerate mountaintop removal mining (MTR) and how the destructive practice is normalized in West Virginia. She argues that place, race, and gender identities interact to provide local support for the practice of MTR. Drawing from the work of Kuletz (1998) and Fox (1999), Scott shows how the coalfields in Appalachia are treated as a national "environmental sacrifice zone," a place that is destroyed and "written off" for the higher national purpose of extracting coal for electricity, a move made possible by the region's economic and cultural marginalization from mainstream American culture and centers of power.

In a case study in rural Kansas, Solis (2005) illustrates how cultural and economic heritage arguments are deployed as a defense against the transfer of water rights from rural to urban uses. By appealing to their history as a farming community reliant on access to irrigation water, community members galvanize opposition to the water transfer by framing it as a challenge to their cultural identity. Similar to the case of MTR described by Scott (2010), stakeholders in this Kansas community naturalize water as being "locally owned, place-based and an inalienable resource" for the farming community, despite the long-term trend toward declines in farming and water availability in the region (Solis, 2005:62). In sum, this recent rural studies literature points to the importance of understanding the role that culture and discourse play in justifying activities that may undermine the economy and natural resource base of rural communities.

Our analysis also builds on emerging studies of the discourse surrounding biofuels. Arguing that the diffusion of renewable energy technologies is more than just an economic and technical process, Skjølvold (2012) studies how bioenergy is covered and ascribed meaning in the news media in Norway and Sweden, finding Swedish coverage to be optimistic and Norwegian coverage to be ambivalent. He argues that the difference is the result of each country's histories, local practices of power generation, and their differing approaches to climate change mitigation. Drawing on interviews and media analysis, Eaton et al. (2014) investigate how community members and the local media in four northern Michigan communities where bioenergy projects were proposed frame the national bioenergy "imaginaries" that fuel local bioenergy projects. They demonstrate how national bioenergy energy imaginaries are reinterpreted differently by different local actors, and argue that people draw on their "lived experiences, remembered histories, and community and technical discourse" to align themselves with frames that either support or oppose local bioenergy development (Eaton et al., 2014: 251). Sengers et al. (2010) also draw on media analysis and interviews with practitioners to examine how biofuels discourse shifted in the 2000s in Norway from largely laudatory to a resistance framing, and how this shift affected biofuels practice.

Wright and Reid (2011) identify and analyze the diagnostic

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