



# One federal policy, four different policy contexts: An examination of agri-environmental policy implementation in the Midwestern United States



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## ABSTRACT

Much research attention has been given to devolved environmental policies and variation in state adoption of environmental policies. Less attention has been paid to variation in top-down federal policies, including in the agri-environmental arena. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is the largest working land conservation program in the United States, incentivizing the adoption of conservation practices on active agricultural land through cost-share and technical assistance. While the program is federal, state offices of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) are charged with implementing the program in their state. Qualitative interviews ( $n = 26$ ) were conducted with NRCS personnel in four Midwestern states to explore similarities and differences between state administrative outputs. Program outputs are determined through a mixture of national, state, and local administrative processes and are driven by dissimilarities in state resource concerns and agricultural systems. The process by which farmers apply for cost-share funding through EQIP is largely the same across states, but states vary in several important outputs, especially resource and conservation practice priority, as well as state and local partnerships. Outreach methods do not tend to vary between states; NRCS districts typically rely on passive recruitment and word-of-mouth recruitment. Divergence in state EQIP outputs constitute a significant difference in the policy context in which farmers make conservation decisions in the Midwest, which has implications for research concerning farmer behavior. While federal policies implemented across the states offer some level of consistency in the setting in which individual land managers make decisions, variation may still exist in many policies that results in different policy outputs.

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## Introduction

Public policy in the United States has shifted since the 1970s to include a new range of policy types, including a large number of federal-state inter-governmental partnerships. Environmental regulation in particular has seen a number of important policies (including the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts) involve devolution from federal administration to state administration. These governance structures often involve U.S. Congressional mandates for states to act a certain way or achieve certain outcomes but largely leave it up to state governments to design and enforce the actual policies (Crotty, 1987; Hoornbeek, 2011). Much of the research on policy implementation has focused on the federalism aspects

of environmental policy, including state adoption and implementation of environmental measures under federal mandate (Hoornbeek, 2011; Konisky and Woods, 2012; Scheberle, 2005; Woods, 2006). The choice of policy tools is dependent on the nature of the policy problems to be addressed (Peters and Hoornbeek, 2005). Significant environmental concerns arise from modern agricultural production, including: pollution of waterways with sediment, excess nutrients, and pesticides; loss of wildlife habitat; air pollution, including greenhouse gas production; and soil loss and degradation (Dowd et al., 2008; Rabalais et al., 2001; Ribaudo, 2012). The federal government has been active in conservation policy for decades, investing significant financial and technical resources through incentive-based, voluntary agri-environmental programs (Batie, 2009; Claassen et al., 2001). Unlike devolved environmental policies, these programs largely rely on state-by-state implementation by federal agencies. This paper contributes to the policy literature by exploring how federal agri-environmental programs are implemented in differing social, environmental, and political contexts represented by the states.

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The political environment in the United States has traditionally made it difficult for the federal government to directly regulate the environmental impacts of farms, leaving primarily non-coercive policy tools available (Dowd et al., 2008). A number of non-coercive tools exist, from subsidies to trading schemes to education campaigns (Peters and Hoornbeek, 2005). The exact characteristics and causes of the environmental problem being addressed affect what policy mechanisms may be effective at mitigating that problem. In rural agricultural landscapes, the wide range of resource and environmental concerns add complexity to policy designs, requiring a range of policy tools (Batie, 2009; Dowd et al., 2008). In addition to the diversity of problems, significant geographic variations exist; for example, water use efficiency and water conservation are significant concerns in the western U.S. but not in the east (Schaible and Aillery, 2012). These factors require federal policies that utilize multiple policy tools or mechanisms and can be applied in a multitude of local resource concerns and governance arrangements. Policies must also be flexible enough to meet changing resource concerns and confront evolving environmental problems.

A number of programs exist in the U.S. that are designed at least in part to promote environmental activities on private lands, especially on active farm ground. These programs include federal Farm Bill programs, state and local government programs, and funds from private conservation organizations (Claassen, 2003; Dowd et al., 2008). As the largest federal working lands conservation program by both funding and acres impacted (Stubbs, 2010; USDA, 2011a,b), the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) represents a major source of public funds for farmer conservation. In addition to providing cost-share funds to farmers, EQIP provides significant funding for conservation technical assistance (Claassen, 2003). Rural environmental policy in general and agricultural conservation policy in particular have been seen as simultaneously taking on national and global scope and devolving to state and local governance structures (Sabatier et al., 2005; Weber, 2003). EQIP represents a semi-devolved governance structure, where program procedures and goals largely emanate from the national level and program administration occurs locally.

Given the complex decision-making process that farmers undergo when deciding whether or not to participate in conservation programs (or engage in conservation activities at all), it is important to understand the setting in which farmers are making decisions. Conservation programs are a major contextual factor in farmer decision-making, from the cost-share and subsidy payments offered to the technical assistance for practice implementation. Under EQIP, states have control over a number of aspects of the program, including: which practices to fund and promote; how to promote those practices and the program in general; identification of the major environmental problems within the state (which help dictate which practices to promote); and the partnerships they establish within the state. These differences in program administration between states may constitute important differences in the policy context. Understanding the difference in program implementation across the country is important for understanding conservation choices made by rural land managers. This study explores variation in EQIP administration between states and the potential impact on farmer program participation. By interviewing a small number of conservation professionals in a few states within a region, this research is intended as an exploratory first step. While not intended to be representative of the entire U.S., from this exploratory research we identify major themes in policy implementation and identify areas for future research.

#### *History of EQIP*

EQIP was established in the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (the 1996 Farm Bill) as part of a

significant reorganization of federal conservation programs. EQIP took the place of several programs, including the Water Quality Incentives Program and the Agricultural Conservation Program (Schertz and Doering, 1999; Stubbs, 2010). Since the inception of the program in 1996, EQIP has been amended and reauthorized twice (in 2002 and 2008). Initial financial allocations under the 1996 Farm Bill were relatively small, with \$130 million in 1996 and \$200 million for each year between 1997 and 2002. Following re-authorization in 2002, EQIP allocations grew significantly, reaching \$1.3 billion in 2007 (Stubbs, 2010).

EQIP funds are allocated to states based on a formula that includes 20 weighted factors that evaluate national resource priorities, natural resource need, performance measures, and regional equity (Stubbs, 2010). The allocation formula attempts to balance national, regional, and state priorities. Within states, a ranking process is developed that further balances national, state, and local resource concerns and USDA priorities (including supporting minority and beginning farmers). The state application ranking system is developed at the state level with local input (Federal Register, 2009; Stubbs, 2010).

Along with changes to financial allocations, EQIP has changed in other important ways since its inception. Initially, EQIP was jointly administered by the NRCS and the Farm Service Agency (FSA), which has historically been involved in conservation activities through the Conservation Reserve Program (Claassen, 2003; Federal Register, 1997). NRCS was placed in charge of implementing the technical aspects of the program, including establishing application and allocation procedures for the program, while FSA was tasked with administering the financial and paperwork aspects of the program. From 2002 on, EQIP has been administered solely by NRCS. 2002 also saw increased administrative requirements laid out for NRCS, including requiring the NRCS Chief to develop a formula for fund allocation to the states and requiring NRCS to develop systems for monitoring and evaluating program performance (Federal Register, 2003).

Under the 1996 Farm Bill, EQIP funds were especially directed toward targeted geographic areas within states, called priority areas. These priority areas were selected through an application-based process in which private groups, local government bodies, or state or federal agencies worked with a local work group to identify and nominate especially sensitive areas within the state. The NRCS national office could also designate certain geographic areas as national conservation priority area. Applicants to EQIP within these geographic priority areas received special consideration of their applications (Federal Register, 1997). Priority areas were absent from the final rules following reauthorization in 2002 and 2008 (Federal Register, 2003, 2009). While this changed the approach of geographic targeting of EQIP funds, it did not change the emphasis on local coordination; NRCS was required under the 2003 and 2009 rules to coordinate resource prioritization and other programmatic requirements with a State Technical Committee and local work groups. The local work groups are required to include certain local partners, including “representatives of local offices of FSA, the Cooperative Extension State Research, Education, and Extension Service, the conservation district, and other Federal, State, and local government agencies, including Tribes, with expertise in natural resources who advise NRCS on decisions related to EQIP implementation.” (Federal Register 2002, page 32,350).

Federal conservation programs are subject to substantial federal oversight, both by the agency that directly implements them (such as NRCS), as well as the federal U.S. Department of Agriculture and Congress. Congressional control over conservation programs occurs in two key ways: passage of authorization and spending legislature, and informational assessments through Congressional hearings and audits by federal agencies. Congress has significantly changed the emphasis in federal conservation policy

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