

State Agricultural Services and Programs: Policy Options for Arkansas

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Arkansas Public Policy Panel

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Executive Summary

Every state in the US other than Arkansas has a means of pulling the various agriculture-related offices, divisions, and/or agencies together under an entity charged with integrating agriculture policy, regulation and services. Because of our lack of integrated agricultural policy, Arkansas misses out on numerous opportunities that other states are aggressively pursuing, including: promotion; marketing; comprehensive agricultural development; policy analysis and development; exploration of long-term sustainability of Arkansas agriculture and rural communities.

Agriculture Programs and Services in Other States. States most often coordinate their agricultural programs and services through a state department of agriculture. The structures of those departments and the duties they perform vary widely. Descriptions of Arkansas's surrounding states departments of agriculture are included in this report. Model programs that are successful at promoting, sustaining and developing agriculture and rural communities abound in states around the nation, while Arkansas is left behind. Examples of such programs are described below.

Options. Options for better supporting Arkansas agriculture include: creating an independent agricultural marketing program, creating an agricultural ombudsman or czar, or creating a central hub for Arkansas agriculture similar to surrounding states's departments of agriculture.

The pros of both the marketing program and the agricultural czar approaches are that they may be more politically feasible in a shorter period of time and they do address important needs. The cons include that they do not address numerous other needs that Arkansas agriculture has, and they make our system larger and more bureaucratic instead of smaller and more efficient.

The pros of creating a central hub for Arkansas agriculture similar to surrounding states include that it would provide a coordinated and comprehensive way of dealing with many of the challenges Arkansas farmers face and it would be more user friendly and accountable to farmers and the rest of the public. In addition, it would make our current system more efficient and less bureaucratic, therefore saving money. And it would provide new avenues for federal resources to support local farmers. The cons are that the agency would need to fold in several existing, powerful state agencies, making it less politically expedient. And it would not solve all of Arkansas's agriculture problems in and of itself. It would still need innovative new programs and a strong, open and accountable leadership structure.

Recommendation. We recommend the creation of an Arkansas Office of Agricultural Services and Farm Sustainability. Several existing agencies would become divisions of the Office, but their programs would remain the same. The Office would create new divisions to focus on marketing, customer service, financing, innovation, and farm advocacy. Funding could come from existing programs by reducing redundancy and inefficiencies, and from federal government and private monies only available to state departments of agriculture.

Preface:

Arkansas agriculture and rural communities are in crises. Small, independent and family farmers are losing ground every year, corporate farming is expanding, rural communities are losing population, losing resources, and in some cases flat out dying. (See Arkansas Public Policy Panel report on USDA Census Data, January 1999)

The Arkansas Public Policy Panel is working with several grassroots farm organizations around the state to help them organize their communities and analyze the problems facing Arkansas agriculture. This report grew out of that work, and the hard work and expertise of the grassroots farmers we work with. Our bias is that the goal of agriculture policy should be to sustain farming and rural ways of life as viable economic and lifestyle choices. Family agriculture is a deep part of our tradition, our stewardship, and our culture. It should remain a deep part of our future.

This report is a view of current Arkansas agriculture policy supports, what surrounding states do, what some model programs are, and lastly an analysis and proposal for new ways to think about possibilities here in Arkansas. This report is not intended to be a complete, comprehensive view of Arkansas agriculture. The landscape is too complex, and such a comprehensive view would be years in the making.

This report is intended to be a basis for dialogue – dialogue between grassroots farmers, between policy makers, and with the public. Arkansas needs to talk about how we can help save family farms and rural communities with state policy. Those conversations are already occurring at coffee shops and kitchen tables around the state, and with many of our dedicated public officials. Perhaps this report will help more farmers and policy makers talk about how we can protect our rural values. This report is a tool that hopefully can add some level of understanding about what is here in Arkansas, and what is possible if we are determined to sustain and strengthen Arkansas farmers.

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