

A Summary of EPN's All-Hands Meeting
“Agriculture & EPA: Rural American Attitudes Toward the Environment”
Friday, October 23, 2020

Robert Bonnie led a presentation on how rural communities view the environment, stewardship, and regulation. This was followed by a Q&A moderated by Mark Hague. Bios for both are below.

Rural communities tend to punch above their weight. They have a significant influence in deciding elections, are well represented in Congress, and are responsible for managing large swaths of America's land and water resources. This makes enacting environmental policy difficult without their cooperation.

Although rural voters voice more skepticism of environmental regulation than their urban/suburban counterparts, there is very little difference in concern for the environment across the urban/rural divide. In fact, in a survey conducted by Professor Bonnie, 71% of rural participants said that environmental and conservation issues were either very or pretty important. Taking it a step further, rural participants even indicated by a 25% margin that they would give priority to the environment at the risk of curbing economic growth.

Although the conflict between government regulation and environmental conservation is not novel to climate change, the issue of climate change is far more politically polarizing than other environmental issues. As part of his survey, Bonnie found that attitudes towards extreme weather events are polarized across political parties and the urban/rural divide. The survey was able to show that a person's views on government regulation were good indicators of their views on climate.

Despite polarization on climate change, rural communities were open to addressing the issue when presented with win-win-win solutions. Farming practices that increase adaptation to climate change, decrease pollution (i.e., store carbon in plants and soils), and maintain the ability for farmers to make a living were seen as somewhat or very convincing by 78% of participants. This presents an opening to better frame agricultural and environmental policies to which rural communities are subjected.

This look into the psyche of rural communities on the issues of environment and climate change provides insights into how to close the gap on climate action. American farmlands have enormous potential for drawing down carbon emissions but, at the same time, are the most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. It is paramount that regulators, policymakers, and environmental NGOs better understand what drives rural communities in order to work toward climate solutions instead of polarized dead ends.

Here are some links to Professor Bonnie's work:

- [Understanding Rural Attitudes Toward the Environment and Conservation in America](#) (February 2020)
- [Rural Attitudes on Climate Change: Lessons from National and Midwest Polling and Focus Groups](#) (July 2020)

- [Attitudes of Rural Westerners on the Environment and Conservation](#) (July 2020)

Presenter

Robert Bonnie is an executive in residence at Duke University's Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions, specializing in issues related to climate change and natural resource conservation, with a focus on rural America. Professor Bonnie previously served as Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment at the U.S. Department of Agriculture from 2013 to 2017.

Moderator

Mark Hague is a former EPA Regional Administrator and Deputy Regional Administrator in Region 7. He was at EPA from 1980 to 2017, holding multiple other positions, including Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Office of the Chief Financial Office, Director of the EPA Region Enforcement Coordination Office, Acting Assistant Regional Administrator for Policy and Management, and Chief of the Program Operations and Integration Branch responsible for planning and State and Tribal Relations.