



Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy: The Federal-County Land-Use Planning Program, 1938-1942

Author(s): Jess Gilbert

Source: *Agricultural History*, Spring, 1996, Vol. 70, No. 2, Twentieth-Century Farm Policies (Spring, 1996), pp. 233-250

Published by: Agricultural History Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3744535>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Agricultural History Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Agricultural History*

JSTOR

Democratic Planning in Agricultural Policy:

The Federal-County Land-Use Planning Program, 1938–1942

JESS GILBERT

In 1938, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) began building a national system of local institutions that joined farmers and government officials together to plan public policy. The project established a network of thousands of planning committees throughout rural America, extending from the community, county, and state levels on up to the federal government. Its advocates saw participatory planning as the best way to democratize the agricultural policy process and to counter growing domination by a powerful conservative coalition. The program enhanced the power of USDA planners, including their authority to coordinate mass participation with technical expertise. The agricultural planning effort signaled something new in American history—a formal, cooperative partnership between representatives of an entire economic group (farmers), administrators, and scientists, aiming to shape and reform public policy.¹

JESS GILBERT is a professor in the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He is currently writing a book on New Deal agrarian intellectuals and the land-use planning program.

1. The program has not been well studied by historians, Richard S. Kirkendall being the major exception; see his *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966). The single best analysis is Ellen Sorge Parks, “Experiment in the Planning of Public Agricultural Activity” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1947). See also Bushrod W. Allin, “County Planning Project: A Cooperative Approach to Agricultural Planning,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 22 (February 1940): 292–301; John D. Lewis, “Democratic Planning in Agriculture, I,” *American Political Science Review* 35 (April 1941): 232–49; John D. Lewis, “Democratic Planning in Agriculture, II,” *American Political Science Review* 35 (June 1941): 454–69; Neal C. Gross, “A Post Mortem on County Planning,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 25 (August 1943): 644–61. Recently, David E. Hamilton has emphasized the continuities of farm policy in the twenties and thirties, including mention of the county planning program; see David E. Hamilton, “Building the Associative State: The Department of Agriculture and American State-Building,” *Agricultural History* 64 (Spring 1990): 207–18; and David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928–1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). Anthony J. Badger of-

In theory and practice, this new kind of state/society relationship transcended earlier New Deal efforts. Incorporating the early New Deal's "grass-roots administration" (e.g., the Agricultural Adjustment Administration [AAA] and Tennessee Valley Authority), the federal-county planning program also included policy making within its purview. Based on a Deweyan philosophy of democratic education, it sought to broaden citizen participation beyond elites and peak organizations. Through continuing education and cooperative discussion among local farmers and agricultural experts, it tried to enlarge and synthesize the views of both, leading to better informed policy. In pursuit of participatory planning, Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace reorganized the huge USDA in late 1938, expanding the planners' stronghold, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE).

By mid-1942, the agricultural planning program had failed, or rather was destroyed. Powerful groups of larger, wealthier farmers across the country, especially the American Farm Bureau Federation, saw it as an organizational and ideological threat to their own control over agricultural policy. Led by a conservative coalition of midwestern Republicans and southern Democrats, Congress denied funding to the planning project. This paper treats neither the program's termination, nor the political context.² Instead, it focuses on the goals and operations of the planning program itself.

In December 1940, M. L. Wilson (then director of Extension Work, USDA) spoke to the American Political Science Association on "A Theory of Agricultural Democracy." Since the rise of the industrial labor movement, he said, people have called for extending principles of political democracy (such as self-government and citizen participation) to the economy. Agricultural democracy was a sectoral instance of this "economic democracy," a way of seeking and reconciling the collective interests of farmers with modern society. But democracy meant more than politics and economics; it was not merely a form of government. Citing philosopher John Dewey's latest book,

fers a good overview of New Deal agricultural policies that treats the planning program in *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–1940* (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), 147–89.

2. See Charles M. Hardin, "The Bureau of Agricultural Economics Under Fire: A Study in Valuation Conflicts," *Journal of Farm Economics* 28 (August 1946): 635–68; Parks, "Experiment in the Planning of Public Agricultural Activity"; Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics*, 195–217; Fumiaki Kubo, "Henry A. Wallace and Radical Politics in the New Deal: Farm Programs and a Vision of the New American Political Economy," *Japanese Journal of American Studies* 4 (1991): 37–76.

Freedom and Culture (1939), the political theory of Harold Laski, and the community studies by American sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd, Wilson presented democracy as a distinct pattern of culture that (among other things) maximized individual participation in social life. The New Deal, Wilson said, exemplified four principles of agricultural democracy: (1) decentralized administration through local farmer committees, (2) referenda to determine certain administrative policies, (3) group discussion and adult education to promote “intelligent participation,” and (4) cooperative planning in policy formulation and localization of programs.³

Wilson knew whereof he spoke. Besides Secretary of Agriculture Wallace, probably no one was as important to the agricultural New Deal as Wilson. He had been the principal architect of the voluntary production control plan that was central to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Wilson had successfully urged the AAA (in which he headed the crucial Wheat Section) to use local farmer committees and referenda (items one and two above). He became the assistant secretary of agriculture in 1934 and undersecretary in 1936; from these positions he launched group discussion and education projects for farmers and extension agents (item three). Finally, in 1938, Wallace, Wilson, and others began the long-term county agricultural planning program (item four).⁴

The county land-use planning program, then, was part of a larger vision of agricultural democracy. It connected the detailed administrative functions of action agencies such as the AAA and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to a general educational effort: “Land use planning is based upon the definite recognition of the planning process in the formulation of agricultural policy. It is placed between the educational process with its discussion techniques and the administrative process which takes place after broad policies have been formulated.”⁵

The three aspects—education for change, planning, and administration—were essential to the democratic process, Wilson believed, and farmers

3. M. L. Wilson, “A Theory of Agricultural Democracy,” *Circular No. 355*, U.S. Extension Service, March 1941, 5.

4. Harry C. McDean, “M. L. Wilson and Agricultural Reform in Twentieth Century America” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1969).

5. Wilson, “A Theory of Agricultural Democracy,” 9.

should be involved in them all. The vitality of “grassroots democracy” in farmer administration depended on wider education, group discussion, and long-range policy planning. Without these supports, it fell back into mere administration.

Wallace, Wilson, and other USDA New Dealers saw the county planning program as a cooperative process of education and discussion among citizens and government officials for administration and policy making. Mass farmer participation was central to all aspects of the program. Democracy, Wilson observed, “cannot be said to be succeeding unless the mass of the people participates in the affairs of government. Only their participation makes a democracy work.”⁶

The USDA needed farmers to help administer its action programs. One reason was the extreme regional diversity of American agriculture. Technical experts from Washington, D.C., could hardly know all of the significant variations between, say, the Corn Belt and the Cotton Belt, or hilly New England and California’s Central Valley. In addition to farmers’ local knowledge, their interests and legitimation were also important to the success of the action agencies. Undoubtedly another major reason for farmer participation was to help smooth and correlate the operations of the various, often conflicting, action agencies at the local level. The administrative aim was to unify and coordinate the different federal programs in the county so that when they reached the individual farm, they represented a single policy. Bushrod W. Allin, who directed the program for BAE, commented soon after it was underway: “We are hoping that the plans of local people, democratically arrived at, can be harmonized with national programs and that national programs can be fitted to local conditions. There will be difficulties in doing this, of course.”⁷

USDA leaders also explicitly included a policy-making function for farmers in the planning organization. They often linked this role to administration, as in Wilson’s claim that farmer “participation involves both the policy-

6. M. L. Wilson, “Society and the Farmer Have Mutual Interests in the Land,” *Soil Conservation* 3 (November 1937): 118.

7. USDA, “Planning for a Permanent Agriculture,” *Miscellaneous Publications No. 351* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939); Bushrod W. Allin, “The National Implications of Land Use Problems” (speech presented to Agricultural Policy Conference, Durham, New Hampshire, 16 August 1939), Classification File, History Unit, USDA.

forming and the administrative functions of democracy.” He obviously intended farmers to play two different, if related, roles. BAE chief Howard R. Tolley was deeply committed to this view, too. Earlier New Deal programs had used farmers mostly to help with decentralized administration; now the county planning committees provided “the logical sequel” of bringing farmers into “the formulation of changes in existing agricultural programs or even of new programs.” Tolley’s assistant Bushrod Allin also strongly endorsed the policy-making role of the local committees. Land-use planning efforts, he said, “attempts to provide for the widest possible participation of farmers in formulating governmental agricultural programs.”⁸ But, how could policy be derived from the planning committees? Who would make the decisions?

The New Dealers had to face the issue of how experts should relate to farmers. They consistently presented the view that experts (extension agents, local administrators, and various scientists) must advise and not lead the committees. The secretary of agriculture set the tone on this point. Speaking to the Association of Land Grant Colleges and Universities, which trained the agricultural scientists, Henry Wallace was clear: “Too many of us” think that only experts should plan and “seem afraid of planning by farmers.” This is wrong, he said. “We must see that our experts function primarily as technical advisors, and that they pass on to farmers the responsibility for making decisions.” Only in this way would the United States have “a genuine democracy in planning” and (his favorite phrase) “economic democracy in agriculture.” His undersecretary agreed. Science is marvelous, declared M. L. Wilson to USDA employees, but it cannot tell us where we should go. The democratic process among farmers themselves should formulate agricultural policy, not experts. He believed that technicians had “the modest role of advisor and assister” to farmers on the planning committees. The most elaborate analysis on the role of experts came from Howard Tolley, whose *The Farmer Citizen at War* (1943) devotes an entire chapter to “The Managerial vs. the People’s Revolution.” “Ivory-tower planning” by technicians is neither localized nor cooperative; in democratic planning, the expert must serve as technical advisor to farmers.⁹

8. Wilson, “A Theory of Agricultural Democracy”; Howard R. Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 95, 123; Allin, “The National Implications of Land Use Problems.”

9. Henry A. Wallace, “Democracy in Planning” (speech given to Association of Land Grant Colleges and Universities, 17 November 1937), file folder “Agricultural Policy—General 1938,” box 5,

The New Dealers thought that policy should be determined by no single group—not even grassroots farmers—but instead by a synthesis of the interested parties. As usual, Wilson put it best. In a speech to the USDA Graduate School, he said: “I do not think we should expect to make policy here in Washington, either here in the Department or in Congress; nor do I feel that policy should be made politically in the rural areas. The ideal situation to my mind is a relationship between the Department and Congress, on the one hand, and self-conscious, alert, well-informed and socially inspired groups of rural people on the other.”¹⁰ Such “well-informed” people, of course, were the democratic citizens formed by the educational process. The ideal policy process synthesized the different points of view of farmers, administrators, and scientists.

Bushrod Allin spoke for most of the USDA planners when he posited this understanding of synthesis: “Free discussion is the technique for arriving at agreement among farm leaders, technicians, and administrators. We think this is basic in policy making under a democratic government.” This sentiment was repeated by the BAE in answer to the question “Who’s to do the coordinating?” It was elaborated at length in one of fifteen pamphlets by the BAE and the extension service that described and publicized the program. “Pooling Ideas in Land Use Planning” is a remarkable social-psychological guide to group discussion. Advocating a “give-and-take spirit,” the BAE says that as committees continue to discuss local land-use problems, “new considerations come into being and new grounds of agreement and planning are found.” Such common understanding increased until a “unified county plan is achieved by means of the democratic process.” Allin understated his

entry 223, National Archives Record Group (hereafter cited as NARG 83); M. L. Wilson, “The Place of the Department of Agriculture in the Evolution of Agricultural Policy” (speech given to USDA Graduate School, Washington, D.C., 11 December 1936), Classification File, History Unit, USDA; Wilson, “A Theory of Agricultural Democracy”; Howard R. Tolley, “The Department of Agriculture and the Land Grant Colleges Today” (speech given to Regional Conference of Extension Workers, Knoxville, Tennessee, 9 February 1939), Classification File, History Unit, USDA; Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War*; Tolley, “Cooperative Land Use Planning” (speech given to workers in USDA and North Carolina State College, Raleigh, North Carolina, 18 October 1940), Classification File, History Unit, USDA; M. L. Wilson, “The New Department of Agriculture” (speech given to Texas Agricultural Workers Association, Fort Worth, Texas, 13 January 1939), Classification File, History Unit, USDA; Lewis, “Democratic Planning in Agriculture, I.”

10. Wilson, “The Place of the Department of Agriculture in the Evolution of Agricultural Policy.”

Deweyan case when he remarked about group discussion, “You’d be surprised at how effective the procedure is.”¹¹

Not that agreement was always reached. Common understanding was based partly on the “facts,” which the scientist provided to the committee. Although facts alone cannot change people’s minds, Wilson knew, prejudice or preconception “is weakened by facts which have been made available . . . through the technique of open democratic discussion.” Agreement came as a “compromise in points of view, even if based on the same facts.” If there was no will to understand another point of view, there was no way to agree. “Beyond this,” Wilson concluded, “policy judgments might differ for reasons no more tangible than differences in social philosophy.” So, while common understanding and unified action were the goals of planning, they were not assured. At best, the process would lead to gradual cultural change and long-term reform. Henry Wallace concurred with these sentiments of Wilson. They believed that such a commitment to open discussion and farmer/scientist interaction—as embodied in the agricultural planning program—was the best chance to “build an economic democracy that will match our political democracy.”¹² It turned out to be no match.

Variouly labeled “county,” “land use,” “cooperative,” and “agricultural” planning, the planning program was a joint effort of farmer representatives, USDA agencies, and land grant colleges to “work out agricultural plans and policies” to help (1) coordinate USDA programs, (2) focus them toward long-range as well as emergency goals, and (3) develop new programs as needed. To carry out these functions, the BAE and the state extension services established county committees composed of a majority of farmer members, the county agent, and the local administrators of the USDA’s action agencies (e.g., AAA, Soil Conservation Service, FSA). Farmer-only committees were set up at the community level. Further, each state had a committee of the state-level heads of extension, the Agricultural Experiment Station, AAA, Soil

11. Allin, “The National Implications of Land Use Problems”; BAE, *Land Use Planning Under Way* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940); BAE, “Pooling Ideas in Land Use Planning,” *County Planning Series No. 5*, USDA, 1940.

12. Wilson, “The Place of the Department of Agriculture in the Evolution of Agricultural Policy”; M. L. Wilson, “Farmer Participation,” *Soil Conservation* 4 (August 1938): 30–31; Henry A. Wallace, foreword to *Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940): v.

Conservation Service, FSA, and BAE, plus farm people—each representing a type of farming area in the state. Officials of the federal action agencies were to coordinate their programs with the planning committees at both county and state levels. Land use was the first focus of the program because all the agencies affected local land use in some way. The July 1938 “Mt. Weather Agreement” between the USDA and the land grant colleges established planning organizations and procedures.¹³

In October 1938, Secretary Henry Wallace reorganized the USDA to implement the program. He reasserted the necessity of general planning in the department “to determine the major adjustments needed to promote a healthy agriculture. . . . We need, therefore, to establish a departmental machinery [to] enable local and State planning to reach the Secretary in a truly significant and usable form and [to] integrate the general planning and program forming activities with the Department; the combined results to guide all action programs of the Department.” An enlarged and empowered BAE, led by Howard Tolley, would serve this general planning function for the secretary and the whole department. Wallace transferred the AAA’s strategic Program Planning Division to the new BAE, which subsequently established the Program Study and Discussion Division, the educational unit that conducted group discussions for farmers and philosophical schools for extension workers. Most importantly, the BAE added the State and Local Planning Division, which directed the federal-county planning effort, with Bushrod Allin at its head. Moreover, to “review all plans and programs before they are approved by the Secretary,” Wallace set up the Agricultural Program Board, chaired by the head of the Office of Land Use Coordination (Milton S. Eisenhower) and including the heads of the action agencies and extension.¹⁴ This completed the reorganization of the USDA for the purpose of long-term federal-county agricultural planning.

The organization of participatory planning spread fairly rapidly, becoming quite extensive by 1942. Nearly 2,200 counties (two-thirds of all in the United States) had planning committees. At least half of all the counties in

13. BAE, *Land Use Planning Under Way*; John M. Gaus and Leon O. Wolcott, *Public Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture* (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1940), 463–65.

14. Gaus and Wolcott, *Public Administration*, 469–71.

twenty-seven states were organized, including seventeen states with 80 percent or more counties organized. Nationwide membership on the county committees grew from 25,000 in 1939 to almost 60,000 two years later. Farm people more than doubled their membership on these committees, to 40,000 (32,000 men, 8,000 women) members in 1941. A typical county committee consisted of seventeen farm men, five farm women, the county agricultural and home agents, the FSA supervisor, an AAA official, a Soil Conservation Service technician, a Farm Credit Administration specialist, an agricultural teacher, a local government official, and one to three representatives of other public bodies. The typical county meeting was attended by fourteen farm men and women, five agency representatives, and three nonmembers.¹⁵

Twelve hundred of the planning counties contained over 10,000 community committees. Twenty-nine states had at least 30 percent of all their counties organized as local planning committees, overwhelmingly composed of farm men and women. From 51,000 members in 1939, these community planning committees grew to over 82,000 members in 1941. Of the 27,000 community planning meetings held in 1941, more than 8,000 were open to all interested farm people. The average meeting attendance was 35, and about 280,000 farm men and women attended local planning meetings in 1941.¹⁶

The planning structure, then, expanded throughout most of rural America within three years. But what did all these community, county, and state planning committees actually do? How did they proceed to plan the countryside? A county planning committee progressed through three stages. The initial *preparatory* phase included organization and discussion of the philosophy of democratic planning. The second stage was *intensive* land-use planning—making an area analysis and classification study of the county. This work had four parts: (1) dividing the county map into local land-use areas, each with similar physical, social, and economic patterns and land-use problems; (2) classifying the present and proposed uses of land in each area; (3) deciding on needed adjustments in land use and agriculture for each area

15. USDA, "Agricultural Planning in a World at War: A Progress Report Covering the Cooperative Agricultural Planning Program for the Year Ending June 30, 1941," folder labeled "Div. Agricultural Planning Field Service," box 1, entry 25, NARG 83; BAE, "Operating Report of the Division of State and Local Planning Covering the Cooperative Agricultural Planning Program for the Year Ending June 30, 1941," file folder "Annual Rpt., 1941," box 1, entry 215, NARG 83.

16. BAE, "Operating Report," 30–32.

and recommending ways to achieve these changes; (4) preparing summary maps and reports, and making them available to all interested farmers and government agencies. This mapping and classification exercise was the basis for making immediate and long-term adjustment goals and plans to guide the action agencies in each county. By 1941, 789 county committees had completed their maps and area analysis, and 440 others were in progress.¹⁷

An example may clarify this process of intensive planning. At the first meeting of the Parke County, Indiana, planning committee, the twenty-four farmer members discussed the evident decline in the county and wondered what had happened. After discussing possible improvements, the various agricultural agencies, and the need for planning, they mapped the county, with the help of the state BAE land-use specialist, a farm management expert based at Purdue University, and the county extension agent. Based on cropping potential, all land was classified into five kinds, ranging from “submarginal for farm use” to “farm land,” which itself was subdivided into six soil types. Over several meetings, the farmers and the experts discussed, argued, and disagreed with one another’s classifications and recommendations, but finally a preliminary land-use map emerged. It was taken to a meeting in each township of the county, where community committee members classified present land-use patterns in their area, color-coded a map for the different land uses, analyzed soil fertility, cropping practices, and socioeconomic data, and then made recommendations. These thirteen township meetings lasted between three and eight hours, each attended by the farmer-chair of the county committee and the extension agent, who said he assisted but “avoided contributing to the conclusions.” The county committee combined the township land-use maps to revise the county map and wrote a report. One startling conclusion was that, in this above-average farm county, well under half of its 280,000 acres “should remain in cropland use.” This was linked to the surprising extent of tax delinquency, public relief, soil erosion, declining population, inadequate financing, and faulty management in the county. Farmers and local agency personnel found the map helpful in directing them away from inefficient, submarginal lands. The committee went on to address other

17. BAE, *Land Use Planning Under Way*, 11; Parks, “Experiment in the Planning of Public Agricultural Activity,” 195.

research questions that were prompted by the map and report. One was a detailed survey of the social and economic roles that women played in the county.¹⁸

The third and final stage of county planning, called the *unified program* phase, implemented the committee's recommendations. Teton County, Montana, may illustrate this stage. Based on the farmers' experiences and technical data, the local committees decided that land producing fewer than seven bushels of wheat per acre was unsuitable for cultivation. By mapping the location of low-grade land, they discovered 20,000 such acres in the county. The county committee's primary recommendation was that this land be used for grazing only. The committee then worked with technicians from Montana State College and the USDA to develop ways of implementing the recommendation. Within six months, the unified county report included suggestions to the local administrators of federal action programs (who also sat as members of the county committee): The AAA should disallow the sub-marginal 20,000 acres from entering its programs as cropland; neither the FSA nor the Farm Credit Administration should make loans on these acres except as grassland. The unified plan also called on various state agencies to assist in this land-use change and encouraged Teton County officials to raise the tax assessment on low-grade lands being cultivated. "Mutual understanding and agreement among farmers and representatives of public agencies on ways and means of getting results," the report concluded, "is the heart of this type of planning."¹⁹

Unified counties developed all sorts of activities and programs. In an Alabama county where 75 percent of the farmers were tenants, most of whom had only oral leases with their landlords, the planning committee encouraged the use of written leases. In Washington state, a county committee decided that farms were too small and convinced the Farm Security Administration to make loans for clearing "stump land" for enlargement. In New Hampshire, pasture quality was a key issue; a local committee undertook a ten-year pasture improvement plan. In Kootenai County, Idaho, much of the farmland was erosive and infertile, so the planning committee got the Soil Conserva-

18. N. S. Hadley, "78 Farmers Make a Map," *Land Policy Review* 3 (January–February 1940): 15–21.

19. BAE, *Land Use Planning Under Way*, 112–25.

tion Service to work on the problem. Several southern counties identified a need for better health care among poor farmers, and asked the USDA for help in planning a solution. The FSA provided financial and technical assistance to establish a county medical plan whereby farmers paid 6 percent of their last year's income in exchange for health care, hospitalization, and drugs; the government made up the difference. This experimental program, growing out of an idea developed in a few counties, was supported during the early days of World War II.²⁰

Thus, most planning was locally oriented. In one instance, however, the planning committees addressed national—indeed, international—concerns. In January 1941, the secretary of agriculture asked each state land-use planning committee to answer these questions: How could agriculture best contribute to national defense, and how could the defense effort help lead to needed changes in farming and rural life? The state committees responded in six months with a lengthy report urging health and nutrition as “part of our first line of defense,” including more hot lunches in school, more consumer education, and better medical services. The next contribution to the defense effort was “vocational guidance and training programs for rural youth,” and larger federal grants-in-aid to bring rural education up to urban levels. The committees' postwar plans included a rural works program to deal simultaneously with employment problems and public needs (e.g., housing, education, and forestry), curbing “uneconomic expansion” (speculation), and an expanded national land policy (e.g., rural zoning and public acquisition of submarginal lands).²¹ To the BAE chief, this quick, massive exercise was “efficient democracy” in action.

In fact, Tolley claimed, it was possible only because of the vast structure of grassroots planning established two years earlier. The planning machinery—community, county, and state committees as well as the reorganized USDA—was in place and ready to jump-start defense planning. The secretary of agriculture thus had almost immediate access to detailed knowledge of the nation's potential farm productive capacity—as a direct result of all those thousands of county reports built up since 1938. They amounted to a full-

20. Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War*, 55–57, 140–41.

21. *Ibid.*, 161–64.

scale portrait of the natural, social, and economic resource base of American agriculture. The USDA exploited such knowledge in developing 1942 production goals for American farmers. Tolley may be forgiven for hoping that such planning and research capabilities marked “the coming of age of the reorganized Bureau.”²²

Official reports present the planning program very favorably. The leading agricultural planner of the forties, BAE chief Howard Tolley, concluded about the program: “Tens of thousands of farm men and women have answered the challenge of grass-roots planning. They have proved their ability to wrestle with complex social and economic problems. They have shown what the average man and woman can do when given the chance to plan for his own welfare, and that of his fellow men.”²³ Yet any evaluation of the democratic planning program must consider two large questions: Did it plan effectively? Was it democratic?

One of the most successful local programs was Greene County, Georgia. Arthur F. Raper, a sociologist who worked throughout the thirties for the Commission for Interracial Cooperation in Atlanta, specialized on the rural South, especially its poor. In late 1940, Raper undertook his third study of Greene County—to evaluate its “unified county” program. His *Tenants of the Almighty*, which is the most detailed case study of the agricultural planning program, is exceedingly positive. Greene County was dirt poor, but the planning program gave the residents cause for hope. The local planning committee, with technical assistance, attacked soil erosion, provided fire prevention, and improved landlord-tenant relations. As a result of the expanded program, the number of FSA client families increased dramatically, from 146 to 535. In 1941, the average family income for FSA borrowers was \$850 for whites and \$600 for blacks, who had their own county agent. The FSA made major advances in farm practices, housing, nutrition, and community participation. Improved gardening was often a significant factor. The planning program was also responsible for substantially broadening health care and upgrading schools. Raper concluded that the program, introduced in 1939, had made very promising contributions—a remarkable beginning to a long,

22. Howard R. Tolley, *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1941* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941); and Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War*, 250–53.

23. Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War*, 174–75.

difficult job.²⁴ If Greene County could make such progress in three years, then the nation was well served.

The USDA produced numerous such glowing (if shorter) evaluations, usually in county reports. And indeed, the planning program was most effective at the county level. In exemplary cases like Teton and Greene counties, it proved able to coordinate the federal programs quite well—to the considerable benefit of the local population. While these counties' activities were not typical of the 2,200 planning counties, their success does show what was possible in a short time with significant government support. The planning program doubtless had positive effects in many communities and counties, but its results were largely just there—local, at best. In many more counties, it probably had few such impacts.

Two other aims of the program were national planning and policy development. Grassroots plans simply did not add up to a coherent national plan—regardless of all the cooperative coordination and correlation. Neither did the local and state committees contribute much to federal policy making. The USDA found it practically impossible to develop a process whereby thousands of local citizen groups could help plan national policies. On this issue, the elevated rhetoric of the USDA leaders in 1939 sounded hollow even before 1942.²⁵ Overall, the program produced some local coordination and policy development, but little in the way of national planning or policy making.

In addition to the effectiveness of the planning program, there remains the question of democracy, particularly adequate representation and meaningful participation. Who actually was on these planning committees? Farmers on the committees were not representative of farmers as a whole. Committee members tended to be wealthier, larger farmers and landowners; small farmers and tenants rarely served. Members were almost always white in the South, even in counties where a majority of the farmers were black tenants or sharecroppers. Poorer farmers were also under-represented. In sum, the typical committee member best represented farmers who used the extensive service: “able, successful, good” farmers.²⁶ Only compared to the dominant

24. Arthur F. Raper, *Tenants of the Almighty* (New York: Macmillan, 1943).

25. Parks, “Experiment in the Planning of Public Agricultural Activity,” 167–69.

26. Lewis, “Democratic Planning in Agriculture, I”; Gross, “A Post Mortem on County Planning”; Parks, “Experiment in the Planning of Public Agricultural Activity,” 14–34.

USDA agencies such as AAA were the planning committees relatively open and less elitist.

In response to the hard fact that the local committees were unrepresentative, the USDA planners admitted the failure and sought to remedy it. Based on past agricultural programs, including his planning project, Allin concluded, it was doubtful “whether the interests of the low-income groups will be adequately represented. This problem is a challenge to all public servants.” His personal view was that the country is “still trying to make its democracy a living force.” Howard Tolley argued for a “working democracy in the planning process”; the interests of all groups—landowners, tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers—should be represented. Tolley praised particularly the FSA, which had disproved a dominant-class belief that the poor were “just ‘no account.’” The cooperative planning organization must bring low-income people “into common councils for determining plans and policies of agriculture.” With such leadership, the BAE urged specific techniques to democratize the planning committee (e.g., broader nominations, more open elections, increased voter participation). County committees were increasingly adopting these procedures in the early forties—when Congress ended the planning program.²⁷

There is another way to evaluate the participatory aspects of the planning effort. Based on the democratic rhetoric of combining citizen participation and scientific expertise, we may examine how farmers and technicians interacted on the committees. Tolley and the other USDA planners refer constantly to the “practical working relationship between expert and citizen” in planning. Indeed, the BAE annual report for 1941 (entitled “A Democracy Uses Its Experts in a Time of Crisis”) is organized around the issue: “How can the layman make use of the conclusions of the expert, and the expert incorporate in his conclusions the specific problems and experience of the farmer?”²⁸

The entire planning program narrowed the gap between technical re-

27. Allin, “Historical Background of the United States Department of Agriculture” (speech given to workers of USDA and North Carolina State College, Raleigh, North Carolina, 4 October 1940), Classification File, History Unit, USDA; Tolley, “Cooperative Land Use Planning”; Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War*, 176–208; Parks, “Experiment in the Planning of Public Agricultural Activity,” 61–77, 338–40.

28. Tolley, *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1941*, 1.

searcher and local farmer. The land-use mapping and investigative procedures of the intensive planning (second) phase were a simplified version of the local area analysis that BAE land economists had been doing for years. That is, farmers conducted part of the research work of the specialists. One result was the land-use maps that could be used by local citizens and administrators of the action programs. Another, less tangible, outcome was the increased knowledge of thousands of farmers about land use and more general agricultural problems and policies. As a result of such cooperative research between scientists and citizens, each learned a valuable lesson. Farmers adopted broader points of view (less local and individualist, more national and social scientific) while technicians were taught that people's wishes and desires "had roots deeper than theory."²⁹

One of the first analysts of the planning program also emphasized the benefits of mutual exposure between farmer and expert: It "attempts through a novel type of machinery to bring farmers into more frequent and direct contact with agricultural specialists and administrators, and at the same time to bring the specialists into more frequent and direct contact with farmer experience and local practices, opinion, and traditions." This process, the political scientist concluded, broadened the vision of farmers by placing local problems in the context of national issues and policies. Lewis added that this type of economic democracy, by reducing the tension between specific (farmer) interests and more general interests, supplemented the more familiar political democracy in the United States.³⁰

Yet the planning program did not solve some deep-seated problems of scientist-citizen interaction. For one thing, the exact planning functions of the farmer members on the committees remained unclear. Although local farmer knowledge was useful at certain stages in the process (e.g., identifying problems and judging the practicality and acceptability of specific recommendations), the specialists usually did the research and wrote the reports. Plans and reports were then reviewed and revised by the farmer members. This review process was not mere legitimation. For instance, a first-hand observer noted that a 1941 meeting of the Mississippi State Committee "was thrown

29. Tolley, *The Farmer Citizen at War*, 258–60, 271.

30. Lewis, "Democratic Planning in Agriculture, I," 234; and Lewis, "Democratic Planning in Agriculture, II," 468.

into an uproar, with farmers and officials sharply dividing, when farmer committeemen refused to accept certain recommendations in the state planning report.”³¹ Farmers also represented their local areas on the committees.

What roles did the experts play? They essentially supported the whole planning process from start to finish. The county committees relied heavily on the extension agent, who in turn depended on land grant specialists and the state BAE representative. These officials generally organized the committees, set the agendas, wrote the reports (albeit with farmer review), and negotiated with action agencies concerning committee recommendations. One major problem was that extension agents knew little about organizing collective action or social economic analysis. Even the state BAE land economists “had no experience in the new uncharted field of nationalized democratic grassroots planning.”³²

The program depended not only on county agricultural workers but also on research scientists. The planning committees, then, faced domination by scientific knowledge. As an antidote, the program developed a type of “participatory” or “action” research that involved farmers in the initial request for technical assistance and the conceptualization of research problems. Moreover, the BAE urged researchers to stay in close contact with the farmers on the committees throughout the research process. The agency saw the probability of professional domination in the county committees and officially tried to counter it with farmer-technician partnerships. The program was moving toward more effective and substantial farmer participation when the “undemocratic forces” of war and special-interest groups intervened to end the entire effort.³³

The county planning program did not achieve its democratic vision. For the farmers, it was neither very representative nor fully participatory although it was becoming more democratic in both respects. Yet compared to the dominant power structure in agriculture built around the AAA/land grant college/Farm Bureau coalition, the planning committees were remarkably more open and less elitist. The planners’ experiments in action research, combining local farmers with social scientists for policy purposes, narrowed

31. Parks, “Experiment in the Planning of Public Agricultural Activity,” 132, 148.

32. *Ibid.*, 216.

33. *Ibid.*, 154.

the citizen-specialist gap that is seemingly endemic to contemporary society. The effectiveness of the program was barely glimpsed in a few exemplary counties and in the national defense planning work—unfulfilled potentials cut short by enemies of mass participation and reformist planning.

Only the least significant part of M. L. Wilson's agricultural democracy survived World War II. With the abolition of both the educational discussion projects and the planning program, all that remained was local administration of the federal agencies. The later New Deal's alternative vision for United States agriculture tried to democratize the policy process, and it failed. That failure is testament not only to its own weaknesses, but more to the obstacles in realizing the ideals of participatory planning. Yet, the high democratic aims of the program, even much of its implementation, can still inspire and instruct today.