

Alabama 2002
Agricultural, Environmental
and Rural Life Issues

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2002 Alabama Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Life Survey Executive Summary

In February 2002, Dr. Claude E. Boyd of the College of Agriculture at Auburn University contracted through the Butler/Cunningham Endowment in Agriculture and the Environment with the Center for Governmental Services to conduct an opinion survey of Alabama citizens on a series of agricultural, environmental, and rural life issues. The primary purpose of the survey was to appraise the awareness, opinions and attitudes held by Alabama residents regarding agriculture, the environment, and the quality of rural life in Alabama. A survey instrument was developed in close cooperation with Dr. Boyd and telephone interview sessions were conducted during February 28 to March 7, 2002. There were 988 completed telephone interview sessions distributed over two protocols (489 in protocol A and 499 in protocol B). The margin of error for those questions specific to a single protocol was +/- 5%, while the margin of error for those questions common to both protocols was less than 4%.

Overall, the survey indicates that Alabamians have considerable empathy for agricultural and rural life issues, but also have a relatively weak understanding of these problems. A majority believe that Alabama is one of the leading agricultural states in the nation, and large proportions of Alabamians believe that the State's natural suitability for agriculture is excellent, evidencing some lack of awareness of serious problems related to Alabama's soil, water, and climate. Alabamians are aware of the statewide reduction in the number of farms and the amount of farmland over the past 50 years, but are not as aware of how great that reduction has been, overestimating the number of Alabamians involved in agriculture by a very large margin.

A clear majority of Alabamians reports that government subsidies are necessary for profitable farming, while an even higher proportion understand that farmers must have second incomes to survive. Nearly two-thirds of Alabamians agree that food in Alabama and in the nation is inexpensive compared with other parts of the world, and they also express a willingness to support policy changes to protect U.S. agriculture.

Alabamians are concerned about protecting the environment, and many appear to favor tax increases for that purpose. Many respondents believe farming causes some pollution, but not to the same extent as industrial uses and urban areas. Alabama's environment is perceived to be roughly comparable to other states, though many consider roadside litter to be a bigger problem in Alabama than elsewhere. State and local governments receive mildly positive marks for their environmental protection efforts, and two-thirds of respondents would support both increased taxes and higher food prices to ensure the safety of the environment.

Alabamians are aware of the economic difficulties of farming on a small scale, but they believe Alabama taxes on farmland are very low, and that rural land is rapidly increasing in value. These findings may help explain Alabamians' lack of support for increasing taxes to improve rural life.