

Farmers say regulations complicate farming

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The UC Agricultural Issues Center (AIC) has provided the first in-depth analysis of the impacts of government regulation on California farms — as seen by California farmers.

The AIC reports that more than 70% of surveyed farmers have experienced increased paperwork and changed their usage of chemicals and medicinals during the past 3 years. More than half of them said that regulations also had prompted them to adopt new technologies, use more safety equipment, and spend more time acquiring information as well as training employees (fig. 1).

Such changes in farm management practices are the most tangible impact of federal, state and local regulatory systems on California farms. The AIC survey also probed growers' opinions about regulations in general, as well as their personal experience with different types of regulation.

Dealing with perceptions and attitudes rather than verified facts, the report concentrates on attributes and impacts of the existing regulatory system as seen by farmers, and on their suggestions for improvement.

Conducting telephone surveys in the summer of 1995, interviewers asked 83 questions about agricultural regulations and regulatory enforcement. Randomly selected within each of seven counties, 263 growers participated. Thirty or more questionnaires were completed for each of eight commodities — Colusa County rice, Madera County beef cattle, Monterey County lettuce, Napa County wine grapes, Tulare County corn and/or cotton, Tulare County dairy products, Ventura County oranges and Yolo County tomatoes.

The survey samples were drawn from agricultural commissioner lists of growers registered to handle restricted materials. (The exception was the list of Madera County cattle producers, provided by the California Cattlemen's Association.) The average age of the respondents was 50 years and average time in farming was 26 years. More than half had a college degree. Three-quarters

were owner/operators and most of the rest were farm managers.

Within the total sample, farm size was fairly evenly distributed — 73 designated as small, 98 medium, 92 large — but size distribution varied greatly among commodities. Numbers of employees per farm ranged from 0 to 2,500, but nearly half had fewer than 10.

Management changes

As figure 1 shows, large numbers of growers reported that regulatory pressure has caused them to make certain changes in their methods of operation. Leading the list of changes made during the past 3 years are those related to paperwork — increased record keeping, more reports submitted and more permits obtained. Time per month spent on paperwork varied by farm size, with large farms reporting an average of 38 hours; medium, 18 hours; and small, 8 hours. However, operators of all sizes said about 20% of their total paperwork load dealt with regulatory requirements.

In addition to the other management changes, (altered use of chemicals, new technology in the field and office, etc.), a related question focused on the cumulative impact: Had the farmer seen any change in efficiency of operation as a result of regulations? About half reported no change during the past 3 years. Another large group said there had been some loss of efficiency, primarily because of the extra time and effort required. A few reported improved efficiency and cost control, primarily because of increased awareness of potential problems.

Attitudes about regulations

In response to general introductory questions, more than 75% of the surveyed growers agreed on two disparate points: regulations are difficult to understand, but they are necessary. Smaller majorities said they believed that effective enforcement of certain regulations benefits growers, but that regulations also create competitive advantages or disadvantages for some farmers. Only about half thought that "compliance is achievable." A majority disagreed with the questionnaire statement that "there has been a recent decrease in enforcement activity." A



Employee safety and health regulations were among those farmers found most difficult to implement.

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strong majority (73%) also disagreed that regulations of different agencies are "rarely in conflict with one another."

When asked if they had personally seen benefits as a result of regulations, just over half (55%) of the farmers said "yes." The most commonly cited benefits were improved pesticide use and improved worker safety.

The central section of the questionnaire probed perceptions of growers about their actual experiences with 13 different types of regulation. First, the respondent was asked if he or she dealt with that particular category. Those actually involved were then asked whether they found compliance easy or difficult (or "neither" or "no opinion") — and why.

The three categories considered difficult by the largest numbers of farmers were air quality, threatened or endangered plants or animals, and employee safety and health. Those that the largest numbers judged easy were employee disclosure, consumer health and safety, and transportation of nonhazardous materials.

Growers' message

More significant, perhaps, are the reasons given by the respondents, using their own words, as to why a particular category was considered difficult or easy. The reasons most often cited for characterizing regulations as "difficult" were, in descending order:

- The requirements are unrealistic, unreasonable, impractical, illogical, too stringent or inflexible. Growers who said "difficult" gave this reason for 11 of the 13 regulatory categories.
- Dollar costs.
- Time consumed.
- The requirements are unclear, ambiguous, inconsistent or contradictory.

Meanwhile, the most often-cited reasons for "easy" were:

- The requirements are clear, logical and straightforward; they "flow." In 12 of the 13 categories, growers who said "easy" commonly gave this reason.
- The requirements are important, necessary and reasonable; the benefits are obvious.
- Permits or licenses are easy to obtain.

The final question asked of each interviewee was: "Would you like to be creative and tell me how *you* would design a regulatory program?" One hundred and fifty-nine responded, again

In the last three years have you, as a result of responding to regulations ...

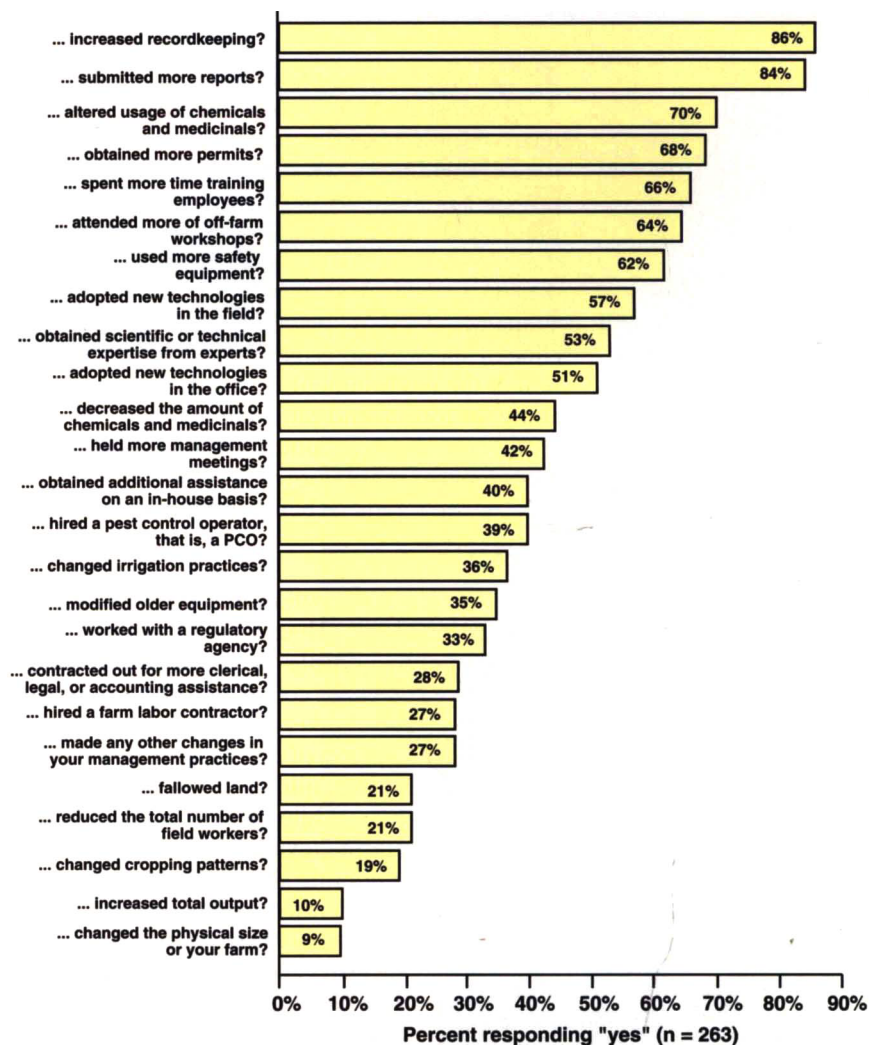


Fig. 1. Changes ranked by percent of "yes" responses.

choosing their own wording. Their most frequent suggestions were concerned with:

- The regulatory design process. ("Include more input from those being regulated.")
- The need for a simpler regulatory procedure. ("Less paperwork and clearer instructions.")
- Flexibility and reasonableness of enforcement. ("Use more common sense.")

The AIC report is titled *Voices of California Farmers: Effects of Regulations*. Its authors are Harold O. Carter, AIC director, and Raymond Coppock, Marcia Kreith, Ivan Rodriguez and Stephanie Weber Smith of the Center staff. The \$15 publication is available from Agricultural Issues Center, UC, Davis, CA 95616.

— Raymond Coppock

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