



# Framing

## An Introduction for Sustainable Agriculture Advocates

A PUBLICATION OF

### *the* MINNESOTA PROJECT

working for strong local economies,  
vibrant communities, and a healthy environment

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## Why Should We Care about Frames

As advocates, our work is in communicating to others. To do that successfully, we have to speak in ways that those people can hear, and tell them a story they can see themselves in. That means we should understand the story, or frame, that they are already in. This is not a tool for persuasion, but a tool for affirming and expanding people's viewpoint. People only hear what they can make sense of — what fits into their frame — and will reject our facts before they throw out their frame. Failure to frame our issues strategically can work against our objectives by:

- Focusing on details of a particular issue instead of how that issue fits into the bigger picture
- Promoting small picture thinking, as if each issue is its own self-contained paradigm
- Not referring to the whole food system

However, if we consider the way we frame our issues we can improve our communication, broaden our constituencies by increasing the number of people we can effectively reach, and reinforce our work across issues and organizations by focusing on a larger picture of our farm and food system.

While we are working to create a sustainable food system, the people we are attempting to reach already have frames about our food system. Research shows that Americans are happy with their food and usually don't think about where their food comes from. However, they do think that farmers, grocers, and other people in America's food system are doing a good job. This disconnect could be because, for consumers, consuming is an enjoyable and stable part of their lives. It is also possible that a certain amount of "What I don't know can't hurt me" exists.

Some consumers do think of the bigger picture, but often have assumptions such as:

- Family farms no longer exist
- Progress is modernizing farming and is an unstoppable force
- Problems associated with farming are just the cost of progress

Because of this, our messages often fall on deaf ears since many people have assumptions that don't allow them to hear what we are saying.





## First Step: Knowing What Frames Are Already Out There

Our frames come largely from the media. The media tell us how to think about the way the world works. Unfortunately, research conducted on newspaper coverage has shown that newspaper articles have done little to help us properly frame issues around the food system. In general, newspaper coverage has focused on either the beginning of the food system or the end.

### WHAT IS A FRAME?

**Framing** is a communications tool modeled on cognitive research showing that people hear every message in terms of their own perspective and experience. All humans compare and categorize new information based on what they already know and believe.

A **Frame** is a foundational story – the perspectives, assumptions and values each of us use to explain things to ourselves, shaping the ways we think.

Examples: Beginning of Food System	Examples: End of Food System	Here are a few examples of how positive coverage about the whole food system could be framed to enable readers to see themselves in the story:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stories on individual farmers, without connecting to larger perspective</li> <li>• Use of stereotypes of rural America, such as farmers farming only for personal reasons since it is no longer economically feasible to farm</li> <li>• Focus on the unstoppable, slow death of rural America</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stories about consumers and consumer choice</li> <li>• Coverage meant to scare consumers (E. coli, Mad Cow, etc.), which often has the reverse effect: consumers begin to think it is the inevitable cost of modern farm technology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on the long-term: what kind of agriculture do we want to leave for our children?</li> <li>• Placing stories of individual farmers into the whole food system, including conversations about policy</li> <li>• Linking farmers and stewardship</li> <li>• Linking policy and stewardship</li> <li>• Helping readers see themselves as responsible citizens with a voice in policy</li> </ul>

# RURAL STEREOTYPES



**Common stereotypes of rural America work against a food systems approach.**

**Some examples are:**

- *Rural people are poor, hardworking, and simple*  
This supports the idea that we shouldn't do anything to support rural America and that no policy changes are necessary
- *Rural people are "backwards"*  
This gives the idea that rural America is unwilling to change and that there are no solutions
- *Rural areas should be protected from being spoiled*  
This promotes the idea that change is the problem, and rural America should be protected from modernization

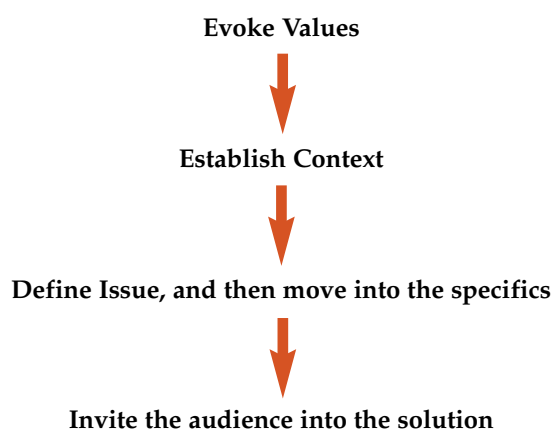
**There are better ways to frame rural America as an integral part of our food system.**

**Some examples are:**

- We depend on rural areas for clean water and healthy landscapes
- We depend on rural areas for food and other products, and their well-being affects us all
- Farmers have modern tools and innovative ways to protect the land
- Rural landowners can protect the land if farmers are empowered to be good stewards
- There is a connection between the problem and responsibility, and we want our policymakers to do the right thing

## How Should We Frame Our Issues?

Given that we are contending with pre-existing frames that are not helpful to our work in sustainable food systems, how do we frame our issues so that people understand the context and care about the issue?



Advocates typically frame their communications by starting with the problem and proposing the solution. Often, no one listens. Instead, by starting with values shared by the intended audience, listeners are receptive, or cued to listen. Next by bringing in the context, or pre-existing category in our audience's general way of thinking about things, we establish what sphere of life we are applying these values to. From here we can define the issue, in terms that make sense to the listener. When people hear a good story they repeat it. By framing the issues in this way, we can bring more people into the solution, and establish broadly inclusive terms of debate for public discussion of the public decisions.

**EXAMPLES • Three Ways to Frame This Message**

Call your member of Congress to support the Conservation Security Program so that our farm policy increases the security of America’s farms and the land.

**EXAMPLE 1**



**EVOKE VALUES**

Food is important to keep us healthy, and our children need safe, fresh, tasty food.



**ESTABLISH CONTEXT**

America’s farmers produce healthy food. Our farms can also produce much of the energy we need. Farmers are good stewards of the land and water.



**DEFINE ISSUE, AND THEN MOVE INTO THE SPECIFICS**

American farm policy can help farmers be even better stewards of the land and grow more of the food, fuel and fiber we need. Unlike payments for growing more corn, rice, wheat, soybeans and cotton, farm policy should also help farmers pay for taking care of the water and soil, and should encourage a diversified, thriving agriculture.



**INVITE INTO SOLUTION**

Farm policy has too often been dominated by a few powerful legislators representing the largest growers and processors of corn, rice, wheat, soybeans and cotton. You can help build the agriculture we need and for future generations by calling your member of Congress in support of the Conservation Security Program, a program that is rewarding farmers who are good stewards of the land.

**EXAMPLE 2**



**EVOKE VALUES**

We want to leave a healthy and productive environment for our children’s future farms.



**ESTABLISH CONTEXT**

Farmers take care of the land for the future, at the same time as raising the crops for today.



**DEFINE ISSUE, AND THEN MOVE INTO THE SPECIFICS**

Farm policy can reward those farmers for excellent performance in providing environmental benefits for all citizens: those of today and those of tomorrow.



**INVITE INTO SOLUTION**

Tell Congress we need a farm bill for the future — one that lets farmers care for the land while they grow our food for today. One way congress could do this is by supporting the Conservation Security Program, a program that is rewarding farmers who are good stewards of the land.

### EXAMPLE 3



#### EVOKE VALUES

Rural land can provide cleaner water and air, and more wildlife for hunting and fishing.



#### ESTABLISH CONTEXT

Industrial, production-driven agriculture requires that extra measures be taken to protect what we value about rural life.



#### DEFINE ISSUE, AND THEN MOVE INTO THE SPECIFICS

Conservation needs to be funded to protect these rural values.  
Stewardship incentives can help farmers be able to do exactly that.



#### INVITE INTO SOLUTION

We need programs like the Conservation Security Program, a program that is rewarding farmers who are good stewards of the land. You can help protect rural life by calling your member of Congress in support of this program.

Some of the common frames that are used in advocating for sustainable agriculture have been tested in focus groups representing the general public. The results of this research are summarized below, and show some surprising results.

#### HELPFUL

**Environment** is a strong frame since farmers are typically seen as stewards who can help with environmental solutions and have a responsibility to the land. *However, farmers are rarely thought of as polluters, and conservation practices are not generally associated with reducing pollution. Conservation practices fit into the frame of health more so than environment.*

**Health and nutrition** are strongly connected to the way the food is produced. People are concerned about pesticides and like the ideas of organic, local, small farmers, and environmentally friendly practices. *However, these ideas tend to be uninformed and not strong motivators. It is too easy to distract people from collective action, and instead see these issues as merely a problem with personal choices.*

**Locally grown** is connected with freshness, taste and trust of small farmers. *However, it is also connected with loss of convenience, limited quantities, produce being available only in certain seasons, and an old-fashioned (and therefore not a modern) way of farming.*

**Small farms** are valued over larger farms. The majority of people believe small farms are better at producing safe, nutritious food and protecting the environment, and support subsidies for small farms.

**Strong US agriculture** is valued so that we can rely on American food, even if it costs more than imported foods.

#### NOT HELPFUL

**Organic** is widely misunderstood and too often thought of as expensive and elitist.

**Food concerns** (Genetic modifications, mad cow, E. coli, antibiotics, irradiation, etc.) are not widely understood. Also, frames meant to scare the consumer often have the opposite effect by making such problems seem inevitable in the progress of agriculture.

**Economy** is overwhelming, whether it be considering the global economy, the role of corporations, or saving the family farm.

## Example: The Minnesota Project's Framing of the Farm Bill

*Farming is an integral part of the American economy. We will always need farms that work the land most productively to get the things we need — food, fiber, and energy. Farms also maintain and build the soil, as well as clean our water and air.*

*American farm policy came out of the crisis of the Great Depression and it still contains solutions to the problems of the 1930s. The next Farm Bill must anticipate and meet the farming needs and opportunities for 2030.*

### TIP: COMMON FRAMING ERRORS

**Lingo:** For example, while the phrase “green payments” doesn’t mean much to the average person, terms like “conservation” and “stewardship incentives” could be used for general media. When talking about the Conservation Security Program as a specific example of a successful model, the acronym “CSP” should be avoided. Another example of lingo is the term “commodity payments,” where “cotton, soybeans, corn, rice and wheat” is straightforward.

**“Farmers Markets” and “Movements”:** “Farmers Markets” have a strong connection with quaintness, and may not evoke the intended image of a food system. “Movements” are often thought of as special interests and extreme positions rather than commonsense approaches.

**Episodic Issues:** Stories focusing on a single incident or a single farmer are seen as isolated, episodic events that don’t connect to anything. Recurring, thematic issues are more powerful motivators for government intervention.

*The 2007 Farm Bill debate must be about the future of American farming. How will the 2007 Farm Bill lead to the American farm economy future we need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

*The Farm Bill affects us all, and it’s time that Congress feel accountable to constituents other than large-scale producers of cotton, rice, soybeans, wheat and corn. Ask our leaders, What is your vision for the future of farming?*

### Context for this Frame

At the Minnesota Project, we use strategic communications to identify specific constituencies who will bring specific pressure on policy makers. But policy makers will only take the needed action if they also perceive that the public at large is concerned about and will support the action. We have to frame the issues in ways that will resonate with the

public, both to strengthen our allies and to box in, or limit, the options of, our opponents. For example, if supporters of the status quo can successfully defend their position as “protecting the consumer with low prices,” they can justify the lopsided commodity payments. But if they are forced to defend their actions in terms of a vision of the future of farming, and in terms of the security of America’s supply of food, fiber and energy, and in terms of helping farmers maintain our soil and water resources, it becomes much harder for them to justify production payments for cotton, soybeans, corn, rice and wheat.

At present, the debate is centered on who gets how much from the farm bill, and the balance between production payments and conservation payments. Shifting the terms to the future of farming moves the debate to the correct allocation of resources to get the future of farming that America needs and wants.

It almost doesn’t matter what leaders advocate as long as they are talking about the future of agriculture. Then the focus is away from old policies and toward current 21<sup>st</sup> century ideas — like conservation and renewable energy.



**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:** The Minnesota Project recognizes the valuable assistance of Action Media in developing this Introduction to Framing for Sustainable Agriculture Advocates.

## For More Information

FrameWorks. *Framing Public Issues*.

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/strategicanalysis/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf>

FrameWorks. *Kids Count E-Zine: A Five Minute Refresher Course in Framing*.

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue8framing.shtml>

W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the FrameWorks Institute. *Perceptions of the U.S. Food System: What and How Americans Think about their Food*.

[http://www.wkkf.org/DesktopModules/WKF\\_DmItem/ViewDoc.aspx?LanguageID=0&CID=19&ListID=28&ItemID=190950&fld=PDFFile](http://www.wkkf.org/DesktopModules/WKF_DmItem/ViewDoc.aspx?LanguageID=0&CID=19&ListID=28&ItemID=190950&fld=PDFFile)

W.K Kellogg Foundation and the FrameWorks Institute. *How to Talk Rural: Summary Chart*.

<http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/FoodRur/ruralmessagememochart.pdf>