

Reframing Farming: Strategies for expanding thinking about agriculture

In partnership with the Farming & Food
Narrative Project.

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The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis[®], offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks[®], toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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Introduction

Contemporary farming is, at once, integral to society and removed from it. The United States has the benefit of a food supply that is—for most, but not all—safe, abundant, and affordable. Yet less than 2% of those actively employed in the U.S. participate directly in producing crops. As most of us now lack personal experience with farming, we also lack ways to understand what farming involves, who it involves, what is required to stay in business, and how it affects our environment and society as a whole.

The weak connection to and poor understanding of farming complicates efforts to build supportive programs, policies, practices, and social connections that can promote a farming system that benefits everyone. The effort to build public will is further complicated by the reality that media coverage of farming rarely touches on farming practices; when it does, it says even less about the social and environmental dimensions of farming.¹ Voices from within the agricultural sector are more likely to talk to other farming insiders than with the public.² As a result, the perspectives of growers are missing from the public conversation, allowing narrow public discourse and misguided policies based on oversimplified ideas to hold sway.

This report is the culminating piece of a research project that seeks to work through framing challenges like these [see **Why Framing** sidebar]. It is intended for agricultural professionals who focus on crop farming practices and the ways in which farming connects to other social issues – a broad field that includes growers, researchers, educators, advocates, and more. The project aims to equip agricultural voices to communicate more effectively about sustainable farming that respects the environment; compensates and treats farmers and farmworkers fairly; and ensures that the future of farming is diverse, equitable, and inclusive, as well as economically viable and vibrant.* The guidance has implications for a wide variety of communications goals and contexts, but it is most relevant for efforts designed to educate the public about the systemic changes needed to build a more stable, robust, sustainable, and diverse crop farming system. (This project may hold relevance for animal agriculture but has intentionally focused more narrowly on crop farming.)

* The Farming and Food Narrative Project team invested many hours debating the use of the word “sustainable.” We acknowledge that inconsistent usage, over-usage, and varying or imprecise definitions of “sustainable” are sources of frustration for many growers and agricultural researchers. Yet we believe this term has its place. In this report, we use the word sustainable to refer to farming practices, including business management practices, that result in improvements on the farm and its surroundings in terms of economic viability, ecological health, and/or social well-being.

To equip agricultural voices with framing strategies that work, this report unfolds in three parts:

- A summary of the key concepts this project was designed to advance.
- An analysis of predictable communications challenges.
- Recommendations for how to communicate more effectively on these vital topics.

Why Framing?

Framing is the process of making choices about what we say, how we say it, what we emphasize, and what we leave unsaid. Framing matters because these choices shape how people think, feel, and act. Frames affect whether we think an issue is important, whether we think of it as a private, personal problem or a shared social concern, and the kinds of solutions we support.

Empirical research can uncover effective frames. Advocates, researchers, and educators can and should use framing strategies that have been rigorously tested and designed to move people's understanding, attitudes, and support for effective policies. A proven framing strategy, shared and disseminated by voices across a field, will accelerate changes in discourse and ultimately shift mindsets in more positive directions.

About This Report

This report is part of a larger body of applied social science research that the FrameWorks Institute has conducted in partnership with the Farming and Food Narrative Project. The project aims to equip agricultural voices to communicate more effectively about farming that respects the environment, does right by farmers and farmworkers, and ensures that the future of farming is diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

This culminating report builds on two prior studies: [The Landscape of Public Thinking About Farming](#) identified patterns in public thinking that shape how non-experts reason about farming and good farming practices, providing new insights into the communications and advocacy challenges agricultural voices face. A second study, [Understanding the Conversation about Farming: An Analysis of Media and Field Communications](#), analyzed media and field frames and storytelling strategies.

This final report introduces new findings and recommendations. It will be followed by a toolkit to help communicators apply the recommendations.

What ideas are we framing?

The field of agriculture is large and complex – and its communications needs and goals are likewise vast and varied. The Farming & Food Narrative Project hasn't set out to meet all of them; no project could. We focused, instead, on empirically identifying effective ways to build the following concepts into public thinking and public discourse:

- **Farming involves complex decision-making and risk management.** Farmers must consistently make difficult choices around selecting, growing, handling, storing, packing, selling, and marketing crops. Variables and risks abound: managing pests, preserving the soil, responding to weather, keeping workers safe, meeting regulations, and adapting to market trends and fluctuations.
- **Farming is a business where it is challenging to turn a profit.** The “cost-price squeeze” - the fact that the costs to produce a crop have risen faster than the prices crops sell for—makes the economics of farming exceedingly difficult.
- **Because farming is diverse in both scale and practice, there are many approaches to sustainable farming, but they all involve integrating multiple goals:**
 - *Economic goals:* make decisions that allow farmers and farmworkers to be compensated fairly and continue to remain competitive in the marketplace.
 - *Environmental goals:* use farming practices that protect, respect, and/or restore the soil, water, air, and life on and around the farm.
 - *Social goals:* make decisions that promote the health and wellbeing of farmers, farmworkers, consumers, and the broader community.
- **Farming practices that benefit the environment and society can be expensive for farmers yet go unacknowledged and undercompensated by society.** To help meet the challenges of farming, society must recognize and support the broad benefits of farming. To make this shift, the public will need to:
 - Deepen and broaden its knowledge of farming.
 - Understand multiple dimensions of sustainability.
 - Promote local and regional farms and the benefits of diverse farms as part of a local economy.
 - Actively engage farmers/growers as essential voices in research and policymaking.
 - Support systemic changes that create and expand opportunities in farming for younger people, people of color, and women.

For more detail on these concepts – including the process that agricultural practitioners and researchers used to articulate and prioritize them - see *The Landscape of Public Thinking about Farming: Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings*.

Before turning to specific recommendations for how to get these concepts across to the public, we offer some cautions about what not to communicate, and why.

Framing to Avoid

Before we craft a message, it is helpful to think ahead to what we do not want to communicate – and why. We can start by anticipating how people will interpret our message based on what they already think or believe. When our framing choices restate or remind people of unproductive ideas, we reinforce those ideas – thus making it harder to move mindsets.

The good news is that since we can predict these communications challenges, we can prepare for them. Research for this project previously identified several cultural models – widely shared understandings, implicit assumptions, and patterns of reasoning – that shape how the U.S. public thinks about farming.

Below, we summarize some patterns of thinking and talking that are unproductive to reinforce when communicating with the public about farming. Each pattern can get in the way of understanding the complexity of farming, or otherwise make it hard for people to see how systemic changes would make a difference.

Are you triggering *Binary Thinking*, which contrasts, or even pits, one form of agriculture against another? If our communications offer up simple pairs of options – like organic vs. conventional or large vs. small – people and policies will continue to undervalue the full range of sustainable agricultural approaches we need. Look for ways you might be pitting the environment against the economy, sustainability against scale, or setting up other false dilemmas. Revise so that you're helping the public understand that “good” farming practices vary according to context.

Are you triggering *Simple Process* thinking, the idea that ultimately, farming comes down to plant...tend...harvest? If our descriptions of farming leave people with their existing assumption that *farming is hard labor, but simple work*, we'll also be left with oversimplified policies and preferences. It's important that we communicate that *farming involves complex challenges, and farmers are highly skilled at managing complexity*. It can help to talk about events and dilemmas that occur before a crop is planted or after harvest (like access to land, development of knowledge, selection of equipment) or off the field and in the office (like decisions about pricing, distribution, or workforce).

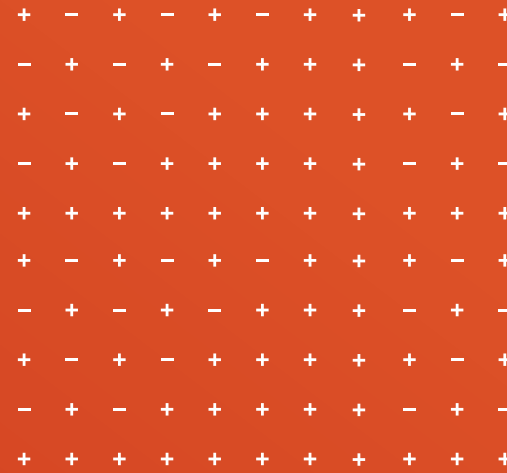
Are there ways that the communication might trigger *Separate Fates* thinking, the idea that different groups in society have different concerns and distinct experiences? Look at the way you refer to people in your communications, reviewing group labels that point to people. (Farmers vs. farmworkers is one common example. Language or images that depict farmers as a “far away,” distinct group is another.) If the language could lead people to conclude that *this issue is a problem for them, but not for us* – or gives the impression that you're only advocating for

you and yours - it's time to reframe. Revise so that the message that comes across is *we all have a shared stake in this issue, and a shared responsibility to address it.*

Are you triggering *Threat of Modernity* thinking, the idea that modern society is dark, and the future is scary? Take care when talking about how urbanization has drained farming communities; this can spark nostalgia, which stalls support for forward-thinking policy. Also tread carefully when broaching the topic of how breakthrough technology has shaped current farming. Poorly framed descriptions of new technology can spark fear, which shuts down deliberative thinking. Don't leave the impression that *the best days of farming are behind us.* Equally important: don't paint a picture that evokes fear of "franken-farming." Thread the needle by advancing the idea that *farming is an ever-changing scientific practice that is informed by the past but adapted by the future.*

Are you triggering *Consumerism*, the modeling of social issues as the sum of individuals' marketplace transactions? In education and advocacy materials, look for words that suggest only individual actions or impacts: *consumers, markets, prices, affordability, customers, bottom line.* If the language could lead people to conclude that *this problem will be solved by changing what people buy,* it's time to reframe. Replace or supplement marketplace-oriented vocabulary with words that speak more to the public good, so that the message that comes across is *this is a public issue that requires us to engage collectively, as a society.*

For more detail on patterns in public thinking about agriculture, see [The Landscape of Public Thinking about Farming: Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings.](#)



SECTION FOUR

Recommendations

Connect farming to society - and tell science-rich stories.



Recommended Framing Strategies

To build a broader constituency for more sustainable agriculture, communications must spark a sense of collective responsibility, build a deeper understanding of the realities and challenges of farming, and connect farming to society and vice versa.

The six recommendations below offer ways to do this.

This report often ties reframing strategies to policies—the decision of a group to act (or not to act) that impacts people outside of the decision-makers, influencing how others think and behave. Policies can be organized at many levels, in many types of groups or institutions - from a working group at a community church to a presidential administration. It’s important to consider how our communication both internally and with the public shapes understanding in the pursuit of productive policy.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Start with farming, not food.

When we start conversations about farming with the theme of food, the issue quickly narrows to individual safety or eating experience. From there, people are quick to endorse anything that they perceive to promote the “purity” of food, whether or not the idea objectively reduces risk to consumer health or fits with the reality of farming. On the other hand, when we enter conversations about farming through other issues – especially community vibrancy or environmental concerns – people can and will begin to grapple with the complexity of farming.

Lead with farming as an issue on its own terms.

What it looks like

Instead of “consume carefully” :

We all eat – so we all need to care about how our food was grown. And if we care about our planet, we need to pay even more attention. To make positive change, we need to shop our values and put sustainability on our tables.

Try “pay attention to farming” :

We all rely on farms – so we all need to stay informed and active on farming. We can lend our voices, our choices, and our votes to farming that reflects our values.

Keep in mind

- **Leading with farming is helpful, but not magical.** The recommended starting point is just that: a starting point. Other framing strategies – like those we show in upcoming sections – are also necessary.
- **Expect interactive conversations to gravitate toward food.** People connect farming with food, so even if you don't bring it up, someone will. There's no need to act as if "food" is a four-letter word never to be spoken in polite company, but it is important to be prepared to steer talk back to farming by returning to discussion of what it takes to produce good food in good ways.

Why this works

The way we begin a communication has a powerful priming effect, shaping people's interpretation of all that comes after.

When we evoke people's direct experiences with food, we also prompt them to think only like consumers. A consumerist mindset brings with it a focus on personal choice and increased attention to risk, rather than on broader systems and public choices. This helps to explain why, in focus groups, talk about food quickly led to expressions of concern about "pesticides and GMOs" and, at times, devolved into conspiracy theories. Consumerism can also spark a complacent attitude toward inequality: people conclude that it is unfortunate that some cannot afford what they want or need, but figure "that's just how market forces work."

Once consumerist ideas are top-of-mind, we have increased the difficulty of getting people to think systemically. We make it easier for people to accept or ignore unjust policies or unfair conditions. We make it less likely that people will consider the common good, the policy context, economic context, strategies and investments, or any other factors that aren't about personal preferences and risks.

Starting with farming, on the other hand, channels the conversation to a topic that people agree is important, and recognize that they don't know much about. This is a more fertile space for seeding new thinking about the realities and challenges of farming.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Make the story about interconnection.

People readily agree that farming is vital to society; we don't need to spend precious communications energy convincing them that it matters. We do, however, need to remind people why it's an issue that deserves more public attention.

Using standalone statements about the principle of interconnection helps tremendously. [see sidebar, **Framing with the Idea of Interconnection**]. Interconnection messages tap into people's pre-existing

belief that farms are essential to human civilization. When we talk about farming practices and concerns in ways that emphasize shared fates, interdependence, and intertwined issues, we help people deepen their understanding of a sector they know is essential but know little about.

Emphasize topics that lend themselves to the interdependence of farming and other parts of society. Elaborate on examples that illustrate the interrelated nature of different aspects of farming.

Keep in mind

- **Lean toward depth over breadth.** A wide variety of issues intersect in farming. Be judicious. In any given communication, it is better to explain one topic in some depth than it is to give a shallow treatment to a dizzying array of topics. As just one example, it's probably better to focus a particular communication on *either* the challenges and opportunities involved in transferring farmland to the next generation, or the issue of an overall decline in farmland, rather than trying to tackle them both at once.
- **Keep the multifaceted nature of farming in the picture.** Develop the habit of naming at least three balancing acts – rather than two – to avoid setting up binaries. Be sure to speak consistently to social issues, not only environmental or economic ones.
- **Explain sustainable farming as a way to reach multiple goals.** Show how farming policies and farming practices affect people, profit, and planet; put the pillars together. See the sidebar, **Explaining Sustainable Farming**, for examples of how to do this.
- **Take care when talking about how climate and weather are connected to farming.** The theme of interconnection lends itself easily to the topic of changing weather patterns, and extreme weather can be an attractive conversation starter, as more people than ever are concerned about our disrupted climate system and readily recognize that unstable and severe weather is tough on farmers. Yet a conversation about weather can trigger 'simple process' thinking, in which people mentally model farming as a battle between humanity and nature. From here, people conclude that there is little farmers can do to cope with natural complexity. To build on climate concerns without reinforcing a simplistic view of farming, move quickly past climate/weather problems into a story about solutions. That is, focus on the innovative adaptations that foster farm resilience, such as increasing water use efficiency, adopting new crop varieties, or taking additional steps to conserve soil.

Explaining Sustainable Farming

In interviews and small-group discussions, researchers found that while many people hadn't heard the term 'sustainable farming,' they responded to the term positively. Whether or not they had previous familiarity with the word, most equated it with the idea of being "earth-friendly."

This means that when we use the term alone, without explanation, we reinforce a one-dimensional view of sustainable farming.

That's why it's a good practice to offer plain-language explanations that spell out multiple goals that sustainable farming practices can help achieve. Without a multidimensional view, people will gravitate toward oversimplified solutions thinking and are susceptible to greenwashing marketing tactics.

Here are different ways of talking about sustainability that sparked productive understandings in our research settings:

Sustainable farming refers to farming practices that - in the long-term - allow farmers to stay in business, reduce risks to the environment and human health, and promote healthy communities and economies.

We can do more to support farmers, so they don't have to make impossible choices between keeping their farms, protecting the environment, and doing right by the people who work with them to produce a crop.

We want sustainable farming to be profitable, while protecting the environment, treating workers well, and supporting the community. Because these approaches can be expensive, we need policies that make them economically viable for farms to adopt.

Why this works

Leading with a values-based message about interconnection can spark a more productive perspective. Our values – which involve our sense of right and wrong – are powerful motivators. When we use language that activates shared values, we remind people that they have a reason to engage in the issue. We also leave ourselves room to introduce our definition of the problem and solution later in our message.

Our research findings confirm that threading the theme of interconnection throughout communications is an important reframing strategy for farming. In experiments, an interconnection message boosted people's sense that farming is an important profession and led people to think of farming as complex work rather than simple manual labor. In focus groups, explanations that demonstrated that different aspects of farming are interconnected were highly effective at steering people toward the complexity of farming.

Framing with the idea of interconnection

The value of interconnection can be expressed in multiple ways, as in these examples:

“We all know that farming has an impact on our lives, but we don’t always stop to appreciate the many ways farming is interconnected with our communities. Farms are businesses that are connected to a region’s economy, providing jobs, and purchasing equipment, supplies, and services from other local businesses. Farming is part of an area’s culture, shaping the landscape and often providing ways for people to connect with how their food is grown. Farming also is dependent on, and affects, the local ecosystem.”

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“As a society, we are interconnected, and what affects some of us affects all of us. This is particularly true when it comes to farming. We all rely on farmers to produce the food we eat and the fibers we wear. In turn, farmers rely on us to use our voices, our votes, and our choices in ways that support farming.”

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“Farms are places where natural ecosystems, local cultures, and regional economies intermingle. To produce high quality crops and remain viable, farmers are constantly considering interconnected factors. Providing a welcoming habitat for pollinators is connected to keeping harmful insects away from crops. When deciding what crop to rotate to next, they look for the connections between what the soil needs, what the market demands look like, and what environmental problems might affect the crop.”

RECOMMENDATION #3

Show how adjusting farming practices and policies can contribute to the type of communities we want.

Farming is often far out on the horizon in public thinking and public discourse. If people think about farming at all, they picture it as something in the background of society. Use framing to bring it closer to the communities where people live and connect it to the ideals that people believe society should uphold.

To reframe farming as a central – not peripheral – concern for contemporary society, pair a widely-shared aspiration or community value with a policy or practice that shapes on-farm realities. Paint a picture of the possibilities of how farms can contribute to the vitality and well-being of their communities – and then explain one or two steps we could take to strengthen both farms and the

communities that rely on them. Remind people that as we go about attracting the next generation of farmers, we need to ensure that farming is an economically viable profession that has a place for people who are likely to face discrimination or exclusion – and then give examples of programs or policies that would help to broaden opportunities for new farmers. Talk about the role that well-managed farms can play in restoring economic and environmental wellbeing to distressed areas, then offer specific examples of institutional or public policies that move the system in that direction.

What it looks like

Example: How farms can benefit communities

Our agricultural landscape is diverse – with different farms occupying different niches to provide a rich collection of foods and products. Farms of different kinds have the potential to bring economic, ecological, and social benefits to their communities. They offer employment, reflect local preferences, shape the local landscape, and pass farming know-how on the next generation.

For example, a locally owned soybean farm might sell globally, but provide local jobs, store and transport their crops in regional facilities, manage soil and water for healthy impacts, and contribute to local community programs and education.

Farms that grow food crops to supply the region rely on nearby residents, grocers, and restaurants to buy from their farms. They contribute to a strong local food system so that even if there are shocks to the food system as a whole, the community has its own resources to call on.

But our current farming policies make it difficult for farms to thrive in many places. For example, land use policies that favor development and industry over agriculture can discourage local ownership and price farmland out of reach. These dynamics pave the way for farmland to disappear, or to be bought up by businesses that aren't as connected to the local area. Land use and zoning policies, local investments, and public support for agricultural research can help a variety of farms remain viable.

Without connections between farms and local communities, both our farming systems and communities are less resilient, less responsive, and less vibrant. We need to change our farming policies so that it's easier and more affordable for farmers to do business, make a decent living, and help their communities thrive. By using our voices and our votes to provide farmers with the right supports and resources, we can build a stronger and more reliable local farming system.

Keep in mind

- **Talk about farming as a source of community vibrancy and resilience.** Especially when farming isn't a major sector in a particular communications context, it's important to remind people that they have a stake in farming-related decisions and that those decisions have implications beyond just food supply.
- **Keep people in the picture.** Whether you are working toward a more robust regional farming system, greater diversity and inclusion in farming, or other goals that include agriculture, elaborate on the social, people-centered benefits of better farming practices and policy. Talk about farming as a site or sector where values like fairness, inclusion, and respect are.
- **Be prepared to address concerns about scale.** If your communications focus on the needs and concerns of larger farms, be prepared to emphasize the ways in which these farms are or can be good partners on social, economic, and environmental goals. When talking about smaller farms, offer concrete, realistic examples of how local-oriented farming supplies food to the region while meeting environmental, economic, and social goals.

Why this works

Connecting on-farm challenges with off-farm concerns is an important way to build public understanding that there are multiple ways to farm sustainably, and multiple aspects of sustainability. The research suggests that the social dimension of farming can be an important way “in” to expanding people’s understanding of sustainability. People value local farms and find the idea of connecting farms to communities appealing. Yet people quickly conclude that the ideal isn’t “realistic.” When we craft our communications to emphasize that what we want is within reach, we create a powerful motivation to support and demand change.

In framing experiments, people who read a description of how farms and communities could be more closely connected were more likely to support policies that would concentrate power and decisions more locally. In focus groups, lifting up community-farm connections was highly effective in shifting thinking away from picturing farming as an isolated sector and toward a view of farming as integrated into, and affected by, everyone’s lives and decisions.

While focus group participants were generally not familiar with the ways in which women and people of color in farming have faced unfair policies and unjust practices, they readily agreed that farming policies should seek to correct historical injustices and reflect a sense of respect and equality for all. In experiments, highlighting the theme of fairness led people to rank farming more highly as a profession and as a sector.

Fairness Framing

It is important to connect farming issues to the value of fairness in ways that work. When we offer an explicit explanation of what we mean by fairness, we can short-circuit unproductive understandings like the assumption that to be fair, we must treat situations with strict uniformity. The type of explanation we offer may vary by context or topic. Here are three ways to translate different conceptions of fairness in ways that resonate broadly.

To translate a 'tailored' conceptualization of fairness, try this: “We need to ensure that every farm has access to what they need to grow abundant crops, allow farmers and farmworkers to earn a decent living, and protect the environment. This means that public and institutional policies must recognize that different farms have different contexts, from the crops they grow, to the soil and weather in their area. A fair system makes room for variation, while also upholding the standards we need to protect our environment and do right by farmers and farm workers.”

To translate an 'equity' conceptualization of fairness, try this: “Every future farmer must have fair and just opportunity to get off to a strong start. To achieve this, we need to address historical and systemic social problems, unfair practices, and unjust conditions that prevent women and people of color from getting a fair shot at accessing financing, securing farmland, and joining the next generation of farmers.”

To translate a 'social justice' conceptualization of fairness, try this: “A fair society ensures that no group is singled out for mistreatment or excluded from opportunities that others take for granted. To fulfill the ideal of justice for all, we have an obligation to change policies that affect farmers and farmworkers in unfair ways.”

RECOMMENDATION #4

Talk about the tightrope that farms must cross.

Compare the risky, complex decision making involved in farming to the process of crossing a tightrope. Talk about how current policy and market conditions make it harder for farms to make it across – and how the right changes could help more farmers strike the right balance.

Use the tightrope metaphor to highlight farmers' perspectives without zooming in so tightly on stories of specific individuals that we activate the public's tendency to romanticize farmers. There's no need to exclude individual farmers from our storytelling. But if we want a story to shift thinking, we need to help our audiences connect individual experiences to the general dynamic at work – a task that metaphor does quite well.

What it looks like

Farmers are constantly crossing a “tightrope”

If you’ve ever seen someone walk a tightrope – or tried it yourself – you know that balancing is hard. Leaning too far one way or the other means trouble.

This helps us understand some of the challenges that farmers face today. Every farmer must strike a balance to make it. They need to protect the environment AND keep insects from damaging their crops. They need to pay workers a good wage and offer benefits, AND cover expenses like more effective equipment, new technology, or other investments. They need to do all of this while balancing unpredictable weather, prices, and market trends that influence which crops they can sell and for how much.

Our policies should work to stabilize farmers, but instead, in many cases, they make the tightrope harder to cross. It is challenging to walk a tightrope while balancing all those factors, and farmers need support to do it well.

We can set policies that work more like a bridge than a tightrope – giving farmers the support they need as they balance worker needs, health and safety issues, new investments, and the need to protect and restore the environment.

Keep in mind

- **Express the metaphor creatively.** The tightrope concept comes with plenty of options for vivid imagery and varied vocabulary. Make the most of them to create compelling, lively communications about farming context and policy.
- **Use the metaphor to emphasize that change is possible.** Don’t just talk about the problem – be sure to also talk about the possibility of solutions. Talk about what can help farmers achieve balance, stability, or steady footing.
- **Extend the metaphor to highlight challenges that face different types of farmers.** Elevate attention to the problems that women, people of color, immigrant farmers, and younger people face by emphasizing that they’re crossing the tightrope in winds blowing against them.

Why this works

People value farming and appreciate it as challenging work. At the same time, they think of farming as relatively simple work and do not appreciate the complexity involved in farming or farmers’ expertise in managing this complexity.

The metaphor of crossing a tightrope helps the public to appreciate the multiple priorities that farmers must balance— and to see that a public response is required to prevent farms from taking a long, hard fall.

In experiments, the tightrope metaphor was highly effective in building the understanding that current policies discourage sustainable farming methods and that sometimes, farmers can't adopt sustainable farming even if they want to. In focus groups, people responded to the metaphor as a good explanation of concepts that were familiar – like the fact that family farms are struggling – and used it to deepen their understanding of the external causes and possible solutions.

RECOMMENDATION #5

Tell science-rich stories about innovative practices on farms.

Show how innovative, scientifically informed practices are being implemented on all types of farms. Explain the ways in which farmers develop, test, and adopt evidence-based practices to solve specific dilemmas that arise from their context. Set the scene for science by describing the puzzle that arises from needing to grow this crop under these conditions, with these threats from insects or diseases. Our research suggests that deepening the public's understanding of the different practices that farmers might use, why certain practices might be used over others, and these practices' effects on economic, environmental, and social dimensions, is needed to generate support for programs and policies that meet the needs of everyone in society.

For an extended example of how to tell an effective, science-rich story about Integrated Pest Management, see the sidebar, **Framing the Pesky Subject of Pest Management**.

Framing the Pesky Subject of Pest Management

Experts note that farmers must, at some point and in some way, eliminate some pests, and argue that the selection of methods comes down to balancing financial costs, environmental impacts, and human health in pursuit of a viable crop.

The public, on the other hand, has a limited understanding of farming practices and a narrow view of pest management. People equate pest management with the application of chemical pesticides. They also assume that on organic farms, no pesticides are applied. And, because they mentally model chemicals as artificial and unhealthy, they assume that pesticides should be avoided, always. These mindsets hamper and constrain efforts to expand holistic approaches to pest management that limit, but don't eliminate, the appropriate and safe use of pesticides.

To lead a more productive public conversation about pesticides:

- Limit use of words that have pest as a root word, such as pesticide or pest management.
- Talk instead about “farming practices that keep insects and diseases from harming crops.”
- When speaking about Integrated Pest Management (IPM), use specific examples of integrated practices earlier and more often than general descriptions of the principles involved.

When time and space allow, use a four-part narrative structure that builds understanding step-by-step, moving through these “four B’s”: *Background - Biology - Barriers - Balance*.

One example of how to use the “four B’s” is below. While you can use this language verbatim if desired, it isn’t intended to be a script that works for every instance. Rather, it is an outline or template that can be expressed in different ways tailored to specific messengers, mediums, audiences, and purposes. In addition to flexibility, the outline offers consistency: a narrative structure for organizing talks, explainers, or other communications that elevate attention to Integrated Pest Management.

Offer essential background: Farmers can’t sell food that has been damaged by insects or diseases, so to stay in business, they must make decisions that keep these problems from harming their crops.

Give examples of biological interventions:

Many farmers use special traps that help them monitor insect lifecycles and migration patterns. By knowing exactly what insects are around, and when their feeding patterns are about to spike, farmers can select the right treatment and apply it at just the right time. A precise approach is more effective, less expensive, and minimizes environmental problems and risks related to treatments.

Talk about the barriers, boundaries, or trade-offs with biological interventions.

But monitoring and targeted control takes time and money that farmers are generally not compensated for when they sell their crops. This means that even when they want to adopt practices like monitoring insects with traps, they are not able to take the business risk.

Propose a balanced, realistic approach.

We need to change our farming policies and market design so that it’s easier and more accessible for farmers to take on more intensive, precise approaches to managing insects and diseases that make human health and environmental protection a priority. We also need to recognize that problem solving in farming is context-dependent—farmers will apply different solutions to

different crops in different climates, soil types, and locations. By supporting farmers' investments in resource-intensive approaches to warding off insects and crop diseases, we can build a more stable farming system that is good for business, good for people, and good for the planet.

Why this works

When our explanations invite people into a scientific view of a topic, we pique their curiosity and tap into the deep American love of ingenuity and the belief that science and technology can solve problems. It also helps people recognize that farming is an applied science and that farmers benefit from policies that enable them to engage in scientific innovation.

One way we tested the effects of science-rich messages was through plain-language explanations of Integrated Pest Management (IPM). In experiments, an IPM explanation generally boosted support for policies that would expand adoption of environmentally friendly farming practices. Explanations of IPM had additional effects with people who said they lived in farming communities. With these participants, explaining IPM significantly increased agreement with the idea that the availability of scientific research influences farming practices and led to a greater appreciation of the complex components of farming knowledge. [See Appendix B for related results.]

In focus groups, people gravitated to specific examples of innovative practices – like cover crops, crop rotation, and IPM tactics such as “specially designed traps for insects that harm crops” – and described them as “interesting” and “fascinating.” Offering science-rich explanations was particularly effective in helping people to articulate how they would like farms to conduct themselves and how they would like the farming system to operate. When people begin to reason through on-farm challenges themselves, this helps disrupt oversimplified, “good/bad” thinking about farming practices. Telling science-rich stories about farming dilemmas and practices offers a way to talk about farming practices with the public that lead to more accurate, nuanced, and inclusive understanding of ‘good farming.’

RECOMMENDATION #6

Speak directly to historical and contemporary inequities.

The social upheavals stemming from the events of 2020 - the COVID-19 pandemic, the protests against the murder of George Floyd, and the fraught presidential election - are changing the way people think and talk about longstanding injustices stemming from unfair economic design, systemic racism, and political processes.³ We need to change the way we talk about farming as well.

Right now, neither the media nor our own field is likely to talk about the exclusion or marginalization of farmers of color or women farmers. If agricultural voices don't engage in these issues, we are not only missing important opportunities to make farming better, we are also sidelining ourselves from the most vibrant public discussions of our time. Participating in public discourse on these topics is part of reframing farming as central, not peripheral, to the rest of society. It is important for agricultural communicators to listen closely to these national conversations – and to join them.

Embrace and cultivate opportunities to talk about how farming can and should do things differently to address issues of race, class, and gender. Share historical examples of unjust policies that have driven inequitable access to land and financing, unfair compensation and treatment, or suppression of traditional ecological knowledge. Help people see how this history affects the present reality and future of farming. Connect farming to community goals by acknowledging inequities and opening up these conversations with your audience. Talk about ways in which society-wide inequities have played out in farming - and ways that farming can participate in larger efforts to advance justice.

What it looks like

Instead of missing systemic connections:

Given the issues facing farmers today – from a challenging regulatory environment to changes in consumer tastes and needs – we can't afford to ignore these issues. We need to rethink a range of policies that affect farmers and the future of the agricultural sector we all depend on.

Try identifying systemic barriers within farming:

Given the issues we face today around inequality, we can't ignore issues of race, class, or gender in farming. We need to recognize and root out practices that have made it hard for women and farmers of color to own and hold on to farmland.

Keep in mind

- **Don't skip over history.** When the focus is on expanding opportunities and access for women, the LGBTQ community, people of color, and indigenous farmers, give people clear examples of historical policies and practices that have created and perpetuated inequities. It doesn't hurt to talk about contemporary challenges too, but keep in mind that the public needs the historical context, which they largely have not heard before.
- **Examine *who* is delivering the message.** It's important for white, male farmers to speak up and speak out on these issues. It's also important for people who have been left out of the conversation to have a voice, and for solutions to be driven by the people who are most harmed by the problems of racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization.
- **Examine *who* is seen.** It's easy for people to view farming as a “white” profession and a “rural” concern. The image we portray – from the photographs on our websites or the speakers on our panels – can either reinforce a narrow view of who farms, or show people our diversity.

- **Carefully navigate the widely shared assumption that the *system is rigged*.** It doesn't take much to remind people of their belief that current systems benefit the more powerful in society, but it also doesn't take much for people to misunderstand how this happens or to settle into a dead-end conversation about broken politics or elite conspiracies. Take care to specify exactly how particular policies or institutions are playing out on farms in ways that connect to systemic concerns. This will help to leverage the productive aspects of system is rigged thinking, while muting the unproductive aspects.

Why this works

People with farming expertise have a unique contribution to make to the nation's continuing conversation about economic inequality, democratic norms, racial injustice, and gender roles. If farming voices don't participate, it's easy for both the sector and its needs to continue to be overlooked. Stories and information about historically marginalized groups can elevate and connect conversations about farming with conversations about other critical issues, including human rights, social justice, and labor rights.

The framing research that underlies this report found evidence that connecting farming to the push for racial and gender equity boosted public understanding and support in important ways. In small-group sessions, for example, people expressed genuine surprise when hearing about topics like the history of discriminatory lending in agriculture. In experiments, explanations that included both historical and contemporary examples of institutional discrimination were more effective than those that focused more narrowly on contemporary examples. [See Appendix B for related results.]

These results make sense in light of ongoing FrameWorks research showing that, in the context of the social upheavals of 2020, systemic thinking is on the rise. Systemic thinking recognizes how the structures and institutions around us shape individual and group outcomes. This systemic perspective is connected to, and is driving, greater demand for structural changes to drive a more equitable economy, a more racially just society, and a democracy that is more responsive to public will.*

* FrameWorks Institute. (2022). How Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval? Findings from the Culture Change Project.

Concluding Thoughts

Public thinking and discourse about farming won't change overnight. The cultural barriers to change are deep. The general public starts from a place that takes farming for granted and accepts environmental degradation as the price we all pay for modern conveniences. While people readily recognize that we can't do without farming, they lack an understanding of farming as a complex system that interacts with other systems, which leads them to imagine solutions that are too simple to address the problems at hand.

The good news is that we—communicators in the agricultural field with opportunities to reach the public—can embrace framing strategies that can shift this thinking.

Start with farming, not food: when we start conversations about farming with the theme of food, the issue quickly narrows to individual safety or eating experience. On the other hand, when we enter conversations about farming through other issues – especially community vibrancy or environmental concerns – people can and will begin to grapple with the complexity of farming.

Make the story about interconnection: people readily agree that farming is vital to society; we don't need to spend precious communications energy convincing them that it matters. We do, however, need to remind people why it's an issue that deserves more public attention.

Show how adjusting farming practices and policies can contribute to the type of communities we want: farming is often far out on the horizon in public thinking and public discourse. Even if people think about farming at all, they tend not to think of it as integral, necessary parts of their lives. Use framing to bring it closer and connect it to the communities where people live and the ideals that that people believe society should uphold.

Talk about the tightrope that farms must cross: compare the risky, complex decision making involved in farming to the process of crossing a tightrope. Use the metaphor to center farmers' perspectives without zooming in on stories of specific individuals, which can activate the public's tendency to romanticize farmers.

Tell science-rich stories about innovative practices on farms: show how innovative, scientifically informed practices are being implemented on diverse types of farms. Explain the ways in which farmers develop, test, and adopt evidence-based practices to solve specific dilemmas that arise from their context.

Speak directly to historical and contemporary inequities. The erasure of farmers of color and women farmers from media coverage and agricultural communications is both striking and important. Farming is part of society, and therefore current societal realities must be reflected in communication about agriculture. Embrace and cultivate opportunities to acknowledge that historical inequities in terms of race, class, and gender have an impact on the present reality and future of farming issues.

Examining and changing the way we talk about agriculture can help shift the way society understands it, leading to more productive conversations and contexts that shape both grower and consumer decision-making. The framing strategies described in this brief can help build deeper understanding of farming practices, counter oversimplified thinking, and boost support for farming practices that work in harmony with other goals.

Research Appendices

Appendix A: Research Methods and Samples

To arrive at the recommendations in this brief, we applied Strategic Frame Analysis®—an approach to communications research and practice that yields strategies for reframing social issues to change the discourse around an issue. This approach has been shown to increase understanding and engagement when communicating about scientific and social issues.

This brief synthesizes the findings from several research methods, which included literature review, interviews, and feedback sessions with experts in the field of farming, in-depth interviews with members of the US public, an analysis of media and field communications, and rapid on-the-street interviews with members of the public, survey experiments with a nationally representative sample, and peer discourse sessions with members of the public in the Western United States.

All told, a rounded total of 3,225 people from across the US were included in this research.

Findings from the literature review, interviews with researchers and policy experts on farming and in-depth individual cognitive interviews with members of the public are reported in [The Landscape of Public Thinking about Farming: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings](#). Findings from the review and analysis of media and field communications are reported in [Understanding the Conversation about Farming: An Analysis of Media and Field Communications](#).

To identify effective ways of talking about farming, FrameWorks researchers developed a set of candidate frames. These frames were tested and refined in 2021–2022 using two methods: on-the-screen interviews, survey experiments, and peer discourse sessions. These methods yielded data which have not been written up elsewhere, and which add to the analysis that informs the recommendations in this brief.

- **On-the-screen interviews.** Frame design is followed by a set of on-the-street interviews to explore potential framing tools with members of the public. We conducted 50 rapid, face-to-face “on-the-screen” interviews using virtual platforms between April 19 and April 28, 2021, with a representative sample of participants from across the United States. We first asked participants to respond to open-ended questions about farming. Participants were then presented with a candidate frame and asked questions that parallel the initial set to explore whether the frame was able to shift understanding, open new ways of thinking and give people productive language to use in discussing farming.

- **Experimental surveys—** One online experimental survey involving a total sample of 3,155 adults (average age = 47.23 years) was conducted in April 2022 to test the effectiveness of frames on public understanding, attitudes and support for programs and policies. Table 1 below provides the demographic breakdown of our nationally representative participant sample from the experiment.

Table 1: National survey experiments—participant demographic information

| Demographic Variable | Percent |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| Gender | |
| Female | 46% |
| Male | 53% |
| Non-binary/Other | 1% |
| Income (USD) | |
| 0-24,999 | 21% |
| 25,000 - 49,999 | 27% |
| 50,000 - 99,999 | 30% |
| 100,000 - 149,999 | 14% |
| 150k+ | 8% |
| Education | |
| Less than HS diploma | 6% |
| HS diploma | 30% |
| Some college or Associate's degree | 30% |
| Bachelor's degree | 21% |
| Graduate/professional degree | 13% |
| Ethnicity | |
| Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic/Latino) | 62% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 15% |
| Black/African American | 12% |
| Asian | 4% |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 1% |
| Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 0% |
| Other/Bi-racial or multi-racial | 5% |
| Political Party | |
| Democrat | 39% |
| Republican | 30% |
| Independent | 26% |
| Other | 4% |

In the survey, respondents were randomly assigned to one of 13 experimental frame treatments or a control condition. The 13 frame treatments tested metaphors, values, and a variety of other frames that were aimed at understanding the best ways to talk about farming issues.

Participants assigned to an experimental frame condition were asked to read a short message before answering a series of survey questions. Participants assigned to the control condition were directed

to answer the survey questions without reading a message. All respondents answered an identical series of questions designed to measure outcomes of interest, including knowledge, attitudes and policy preferences relating to farming. Each battery consisted of multiple questions and were primarily measured using Likert- type scales with five- or seven-point scales. Several yes/no questions and open-ended questions requiring free-text answers were also included in the survey.

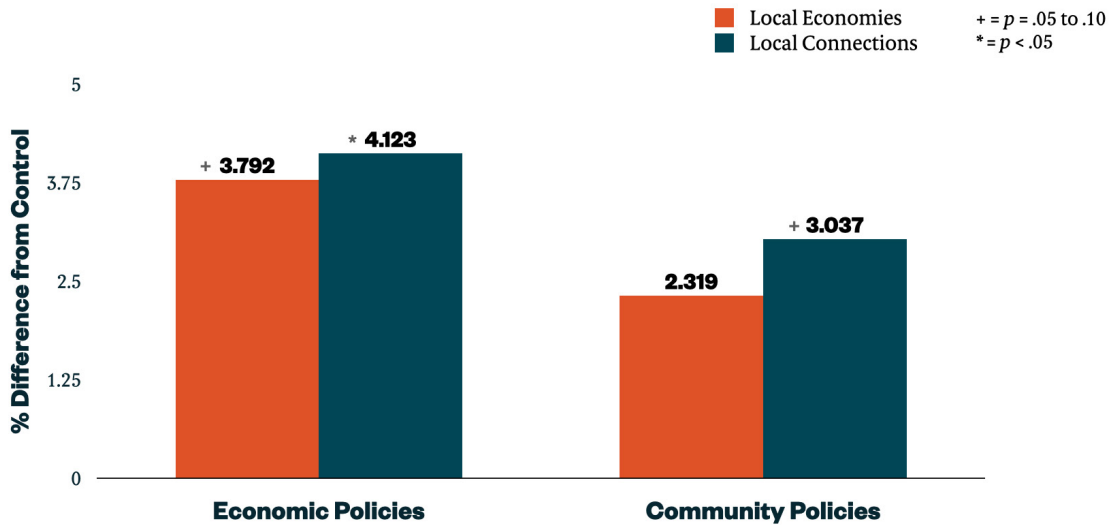
We used multiple regression analysis to determine whether there were significant differences on the outcomes between each of the frame treatments and the control condition. A threshold of $p < .05$ was used to determine whether the frame treatments had any significant effects. Significant differences were understood as evidence that a frame influenced a particular outcome (for example, policy support).

As with all research, it is important to remember that results are based on a sample of the population, not the entire population. As such, all results are subject to margins of error.

- **Peer Discourse Sessions.** Following the survey experiments, four (4) 120-minute peer discourse sessions were conducted using virtual platforms between May 11 and May 13, 2022, with members of the public from rural, urban, and suburban areas in the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington. Each session included six (6) participants and a moderator. Peer discourse sessions are a qualitative approach to exploring the common patterns of talking — or public discourses — that people use in social settings, and how they negotiate and move among these patterned ways of talking. These sessions began with open-ended discussions about farming followed by moderator-introduced framed passages — or “primes” — designed to influence the ensuing discussion in specific ways. The sessions involve group exercises in which participants break out into smaller groups tasked with designing a plan to address some part of the larger issue of farming.

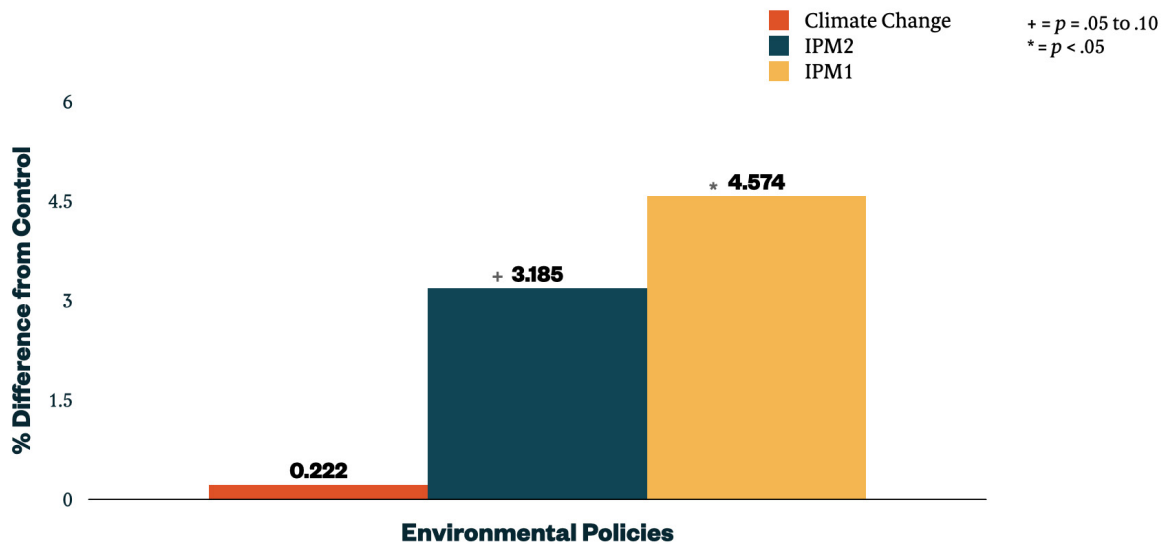
Appendix B: Selected Results from Survey Experiments

Data supporting recommendation #3

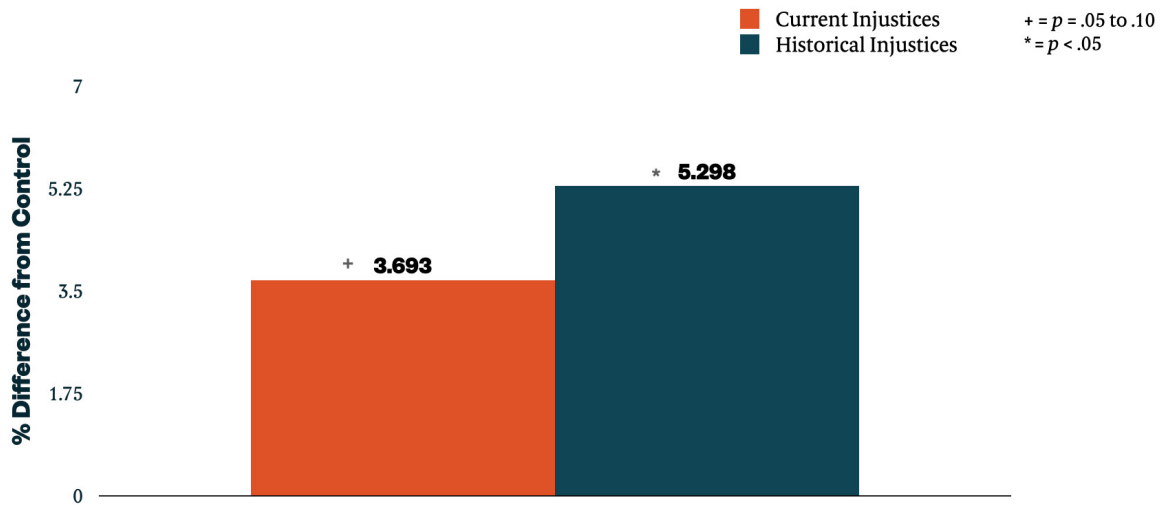


In framing experiments, people who read a description of how farms and communities could be more closely connected were more likely to support policies that would concentrate power and decisions more locally.

Data supporting recommendation #5



Data supporting recommendation #6



Endnotes

1. Miller, Theresa, Busso, Daniel, Volmert, Andrew, Davis, Catasha, & Sweetland, Julie. (2020). Understanding the conversation about farming: An analysis of media and field communications. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
2. Miller, Theresa, Busso, Daniel, Volmert, Andrew, Davis, Catasha, & Sweetland, Julie. (2020). Understanding the conversation about farming: An analysis of media and field communications. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
3. FrameWorks Institute. (2022). How Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval? Findings from the Culture Change Project.