

EWG's Ken Cook tells his story

By CECIL H. YANCY JR.

KEN Cook's presence in the farm-policy debate is similar to a black-sheep cousin at a family reunion: Perceptions may vary as to what his presence means to the family, but everybody knows he's there.

Ask virtually anyone in Southern farm country what they think about the Web site at www.ewg.org that lists farm payments and names, and they'll know what you're talking about.

Cook, president and co-founder of the Environmental Working Group, created a stir when he released his now-famous Web site listing the subsidies and farmers who receive

Key Points

- Cook says conservation should play a larger role in farm policy.
- He says he's raising questions about "fairness and equity."
- Cook asks: "Are you getting the farm system you want?"

them back in 2001. Heading into the 2007 Farm Bill debate, his group figures to again play a role, "introducing some uncomfortable questions."

Following the money

Cook began raising questions regarding farm subsidies in the 1980s. Congressional debate on the 1985 Farm Bill led to more conservation spending linked to farm programs and alliances

with mainline farm groups such as the American Farm Bureau. By the 1990 Farm Bill, Cook says, those alliances between the environmental groups that had brokered the deal and farm groups had become shaky. The reason, Cook says, was the perception that a choice had to be made between farm payments and conservation.

Conservation received the short end of the stick, he contends, pointing to cuts of more than \$200 billion from 1985-2000. "The demand is there [for conservation], but the funds are lacking," Cook says.

In the early 1990s, Cook took the tack to "follow the money to compete with commodity groups for money and ideas." He and Richard Wiles began the EWG in 1993, focusing on research with a political punch.

Relying on the skills he learned while at the Congressional Research Service, the arm of Congress that evaluates data for lawmakers, Cook began filing Freedom of Information Act requests and started to mine the vast database of the USDA.

Cook, who holds an advanced soil science degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia, already knew the value of applied research. With



UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS: Ken Cook says that's the impact of the Environmental Working Group.

the resources of the Library of Congress at his disposal while at the Congressional Research Service, he learned access to data mattered.

"You get to see the power of information presented. That's kind of how I saw a way to have a research-based impact on policy."

While many environmental groups invested in lawyers in the 1990s, Cook says the EWG bought computer databases.

EWG also does research on a

number of industries, including mining and chemicals.

The farm-subsidy database was EWG's first big project. Beginning with the release of the report on farm subsidies entitled "City Slickers" in 1995, Cook drew attention to farm-subsidy payments to America's biggest cities. The bombshell, however, came in 2001, with the release of an extensive Web site listing which farmers received what payments.

Seeking balance

Cook insists that he isn't against farmers. He contends he's raising questions about "fairness and equity — whether we've got the right balance of programs."

In making his case to a group of Mid-South farmers at a conference at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, Cook pointed out, "There are two different worlds: the subsidized world of agriculture and the one where farmers do not receive subsidies."

While acknowledging the need for special assistance to farmers in cases of drought, hurricanes and high energy prices, Cook points out that over the past decade the top 10 counties in Arkansas have received \$227 million in subsidy payments.

"Over the long haul," he asks, "are you getting the kind of farm system that you want?"



Wanted man claims ag roots

KEN Cook remembers the feeling of getting picked up by his cousins in the suburbs of St. Louis and driving to southern Missouri to spend the summer on his uncle's cow-calf operation in Roselle, Mo. The farm was started by his grandfather Samuel Cook and inherited by his Uncle Paul. Cook grew up in a St. Louis suburb after his father died when he was 5.

His father's folks took him in every summer on the family's 1,000-acre ranch. Life on the farm included a lot of hard work.

During those summers, Cook arose early in the morning to cut and bale hay and feed the cows. He viewed it as "another world. I didn't have friends who had those kinds of experiences," he says. "Unfortunately, it's a world that most folks don't get to experience."

In college at the University of Missouri-Columbia, he studied agriculture and history with an aim at using his education to protect farmland. He holds a master's degree in soil science.

Rice industry tries reaching out to EWG

By CECIL H. YANCY JR.

THE California rice industry went looking for the man who runs the infamous Web site in Washington. It found a "very enlightened gentleman, a good listener and a person very receptive to a visit to California rice country."

The first meeting between Ken Cook, co-founder and president of the Environmental Working Group, Charlie Hoppin vice chairman of Farmers' Rice Cooperative, and Bill Huffman, vice president of FRC, led to a visit from Cook last October, another meeting this winter and yet another visit this spring. Since his visit to California last year, Cook has toured farms in the Mid-South and other regions.

"We found him to be a very astute conservationist,"

says Huffman, "but because of his connection to agriculture growing up on a farm, he appears to be a down-home advocate. He realizes farmers need to feed America. He seems to be very much interested in the application of federal money that normally goes to commodity subsidy programs to be used on working lands for conservation purposes."

The Californians gave Cook a look-see at the kinds of innovations that have put the spotlight on the environmental efforts of the rice industry: creating wildlife habitat and incorporating straw residue after harvest instead of burning it, as well as water conservation efforts. While walking the fields, growers discussed Cook's objectives for the EWG.

Before the visit, everyone in the area had doubts about Cook, Huffman concedes.

"Everybody was wondering whether he put on his jeans like you and I do, and whether or not he was a real person." After the visit, everyone involved in the program "warmed up to him and listened intently to what he had to say."

Favorable impression

While recognizing that the EWG is well-connected, isn't on the same page as much of agriculture and has been at it a long time, the rice group found "they're reasonable, particularly Mr. Cook," Huffman says. "He left California with a very favorable impression. Many of the programs Mr. Cook is advocating, our producers are already using."

Huffman points out that much of the environmental movement originates in California, so farmers there "have been at it a little longer in

having to respond and maybe adjust their attitudes and farming practices."

To illustrate the point of working with environmentalists, Huffman recalls a book published many years ago called "Cadillac Desert" by Marc Reisner. The book made the blanket statement: "Why are we raising rice in a desert in California?" Instead of ignoring the statement, attacking the author or offering a different take on it, the California rice industry invited the author to "come up and see what we're doing."

By reaching out to the "misguided author," the California rice industry was able to change the author's opinion.

Huffman says the efforts with Ken Cook are no different. "We're reaching out. Maybe we can find common ground and work together."