

Theory-to-Practice Proposal
“America the Beautiful: Documenting American Farm-life”
Meg Edwards, Class of 2022
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Objectives

I will document some of the environmental and political challenges facing modern American farms, through a series of interviews with farmers in different U.S. regions. Afterwards, I will create an interactive map with which viewers can explore those regions and learn about farmers’ perspectives on core issues relating to the agricultural field, such as subsidies, land consolidation, and environmental regulation.

Information from the interviews will be used to inform my senior thesis, and creating the map will sharpen my skills in ArcGIS and Storymaps. My long-term hope is to conduct similar qualitative research in a future career in public policy assessment.

Description

The content of the map will come from a series of interviews. Interviews will be tailored for each farmer, but will broadly address four themes: changes in land usage over time, connections between local communities and the land, effects of a changing environment on farm labor and practices, as well as the effects of regulatory change. After consulting Dr. Kira Bailey, I’ve determined that my interviews fall under the category of journalism, so I will not need to pursue IRB approval.

I have chosen a mix of farm types, to reflect the diversity of the agricultural industry. Some of the farmers with whom I have arranged interviews have special knowledge of environmental policy, like Carrie Vollmer-Sanders of the Nature Conservancy, or extensive

experience in agriculture, like Janna Fritz of the Michigan Soybean Promotion Committee. Others own large, conventional farms, or are multigenerational farmers carrying on centuries of tradition. To help organize the interviews, ten professionals at the Nature Conservancy and two at the publication *Farm Journal* have lent me their advice and connections to review my interview questions and contact farmers in eight states. A project of this scale would be very difficult for an undergraduate student to manage without their help, and I am emboldened by their support.

Accompanying me on this trip will be a recent graduate of the journalism school at UNC-Chapel Hill. He is a photographer, and our projects will be separate but adjacent. His photos will improve my map, and some details from interviews will be included in his photostory. NONE of the expenses outlined in the budget will be allocated to cover his needs, and he will not be paid or supported in any way by this grant.

We will drive to each of the farms in a cargo van and park at campsites throughout the trip. This vehicle is fully equipped with beds and a sink, to reduce both lodging costs and COVID risk by avoiding hotels. Interviews will be in-person; some of the issues raised in interviews are sensitive and may provoke strong emotions. Additionally, many rural Americans do not have sufficiently reliable internet access or phone service to conduct a lengthy remote interview.

After my interviews are complete, I will return to Ohio to create the map, consulting Dr. Ashley Allen for help if necessary. I expect the interview process to require four weeks of travel, from June 5-July 4th, 2021. (See budget for full itinerary). The map will be finished before the fall semester begins. I will use Storymaps, a program I worked with in GEOG 345. I envision this map as a multimedia experience for viewers reading it on my website or an online publication. Viewers will be presented with the 9 USDA agricultural regions. From there, they

can select an icon to learn about a farm in that region. The icon will bring up photos of the farm and farmer, and then viewers can choose to read or listen to an excerpt of the interview with that farmer.

Evaluation, Assessment, and Sharing

Throughout the interview process, I will continually assess my objectives to ensure that the interviews provide a diverse set of perspectives on contemporary agricultural issues. I am already working on this by assessing that my interviewees are racially diverse, from different age groups, and that their farms are different sizes. The interviews will partly inform my Global Scholars thesis, comparing environmental attitudes and legal traditions in the US and Ecuador.

The finished map will be submitted for publication in various magazines. I plan to deliver a presentation of my experiences in rural America as part of the student symposium in the spring of 2022, to share the map and excerpts with students interested in human geography, politics, and the environment.

Personal Statement

Agricultural reform has interested me for over four years. I have written papers on land policy in Brazil and Paraguay, attended a global conference on agricultural technology, and taken three botany courses to better understand the most important industry on the planet. But, if I am to write policy, I should have experience listening to the people most affected by that policy.

While working on a small farm in Virginia last summer, I gained an even greater respect for the challenges that farmers face. Many environmental activists advocate for policies without

accounting for how they might affect farm livelihoods. That is not to say that agricultural interests are in conflict with environmental interests- I believe the opposite is true. But agriculture workers have their own set of needs and circumstances, as well as ways to contribute to the environmental movement. No map can capture the full diversity of farm life in America, certainly not one put together in a summer. My hope is that this map will help to start a conversation between policymakers and farmers, who are so often left out of environmental discussions despite being in a key position to contribute new ideas, and profoundly affected by both climate change and regulation.

Regardless of whether the map is immediately published, the experience of conducting these interviews will be invaluable next fall when I am conducting research during my study abroad program in Ecuador, which focuses on how policy there has addressed the needs of farmers, indigenous communities, and the environment. To have a career in public policy, it is important to develop skills as an interviewer, to be able to listen to people's concerns and build bridges between communities with seemingly disparate needs. I also will use findings from the interviews when writing my Palmer Global Scholars thesis. This comparative study will prepare me well for a career in public policy and rural and environmental issues, whether I choose to work in international or domestic politics.

I am also prepared in the practical sense to conduct this project. I have a clean driving record and have travelled and camped in this van previously. As a reporter for the *OWU Transcript*, I conducted interviews on a variety of subjects. This past fall I completed the Data and Policy Summer Scholars program through the University of Chicago, which gave me key skills in policy research and designing research studies. Previous courses have introduced me to ArcGIS and Storymaps, the software that will be used in this project. Finally, I am familiar with

rural environmental and food security issues, thanks to Dr. Anderson's *Climate for Conversations* lecture series, which brought local farmers to campus to discuss exactly the issues at the heart of this project, and through previous internships at the Ohio Environmental Council and Local Matters. My contacts through the Nature Conservancy and *Farm Journal* have also coached me on the most important issues in each of the regions involved in this project, so that I may enter my interviews informed and ask relevant questions.