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Editor’s note: The author welcomes feedback from readers on the tradeoffs of a multifunctional agriculture and how cooperatives may be affected by these changes. Their thoughts may be used in future articles, and can be e-mailed to: Thomas.Gray@usda.gov.

During the past decade, understanding the multifunctional nature of agriculture has emerged in scientific and farm policy debates. New language and new terms are emerging.

Shift to multifunctional agriculture

Talk about MFA at farm meetings these days may not be referencing the Missouri Farmers Association, but rather a multifunctional agriculture (MFA).

No longer is agriculture solely about food and fiber production. While food prices have dropped recently, the price spikes of 2008 were at least partially influenced by agriculture’s emergence as a developing source of energy. Mitigation of global warming, rural development and conservation of resources are other demands.

In a recent conference in Atlanta, a “Biofuels Symposium” was held in connection with the 2009 annual meetings of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists. A series of presentations was made on topics such as biofuels and rural development, anaerobic digestion, financial crises and biofuels, and shifts in emphases in farm bill legislation from trade to biofuels. This article presents some of the highlights of the symposium.

Rural development and the environment

Albert Iaori, a sociologist at Kansas State University, presented a case study on an ethanol plant in Russel, Kan., a rural community of less than 5,000 people. From a survey of the local population, Iaori found that community acceptance of the biofuel plant was mixed.

More than 75 percent of those surveyed said the ethanol plant was important, or very important, for the local economy. The facility was credited for creating new jobs and helping to boost prices for local grain farmers. It was valued as well for helping reduce dependency on foreign oil. However, some of those opposed to the plant argued that ethanol is not as energy efficient as fossil fuels.

The most contentious issues revolved around the environmental impact. Those in support of ethanol saw it as environmentally friendly. However, nearly 60 percent of those surveyed said they had moderate-to-high levels of concern about the environmental impact of the local facility.

Nearly 90 percent said they believed biofuel production had already contributed to poor water quality. Others expressed concern about the diversion of water needed for alternative uses both inside and outside the city. Concern was also expressed about odors, air pollution, wear on local roads (due to truck traffic), increased traffic congestion and increases in local food prices.

Rural development and competing international interests

Theresa Sefia, sociology professor at Kansas State University, discussed the findings of her study: “Biofueling Rural Development: Prospects and Challenges, Locally and Globally.” Sefia’s work parallels Iaori’s in documenting the positive impacts of biofuels development on rural employment and farm incomes.

In a study of two rural Kansas communities, nearly 70 percent of those surveyed said jobs at the ethanol plant were better than most, or among the best jobs available in the area. Biofuel facilities were seen as having secondary effects as well, improving economic diversification in rural areas and