

Environmental Justice: Perceptions of Issues, Awareness, and Assistance

Executive Summary

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is the primary Federal agency charged with helping private landowners protect America's natural resources, which include soil, water, air, plants, and animals. In keeping with that mission, it is the agency's goal to ensure that all people receive needed assistance so they can live in a safe environment.

The issue of environmental justice and unequal access to assistance threatens that goal. The agency funded “Environmental Justice: Perceptions of Issues, Awareness, and Assistance” under the leadership of the Social Sciences Institute (SSI). The SSI entered into a partnership with the Southern Food Systems Education Consortium (SOFSEC) to gain a better understanding of the issues as they relate to agriculture, limited resource farmers, and underserved clientele.

SOFSEC is comprised of six 1890 land-grant institutions (North Carolina A&T State, Fort Valley State, Tuskegee, Alabama A&M, Alcorn, and Southern universities). SOFSEC agreed to assist in creating a survey instrument and to administer the survey through face-to-face interviews. The survey contains 30 questions on environmental justice issues, awareness, and assistance. Eight questions capture demographic information about the respondents. SOFSEC interviewers conducted face-to-face interviews with 743 randomly selected respondents in 11 Black Belt states (VA, NC, SC, GA, FL, AL, TN, AR, MS, LA, and east TX). Black Belt counties were defined as those counties having the following: 25 percent or more minority population, general population under 100,000, city population under 50,000, 25 percent of land in agricultural use, and 25 percent or more of the population living below the poverty level. Each university was to conduct 200 interviews for a total of 1200. The response rate was 62 percent.

The purpose of the project was to gather information about existing environmental issues, whether environmental injustices are occurring, the level of service being provided by various agencies, people's overall perception and knowledge of environmental justice.

Background Characteristics

Of the 743 respondents, 54 percent were male and 46 percent were female. Half the respondents listed themselves as being between the ages of 30-49. The ethnic background revealed that 51 percent were African-American and 47 percent were Caucasian. The majority of the respondents classified themselves as being married.

The majority of the respondents listed their highest level of education as high school graduates. The next highest response was having some college education followed by college graduates.

In terms of household income, 30 percent listed themselves as having incomes under \$20,000, 22 percent were from \$20,000 to 29,999, and 20 percent were between \$30,000 to \$39,999.

Respondents live mostly in towns (40 percent) followed by a rural areas (27 percent), then the city (16 percent).

General Findings

A Likert scale was used in the survey with 1 being extremely not serious, 2 being not serious, 3 being unsure, 4 being serious, and 5 being extremely serious.

Issues

- By calculating means for a series of questions, respondents ranked issues in the following order: water pollution, the most serious (3.3), groundwater contamination (3.2), and air pollution (2.7). Water pollution (65 percent) was also said to be most important to respondents, followed by air pollution (49 percent), and groundwater contamination (39 percent).
- The perceived environmental causes of the issues above were said to be industry followed by chemical runoff, farm, and flooding.
- The majority of respondents felt there was a great environmental impact on human health. Property, business, and animal health received neutral ratings.
- Respondents were asked to compare their community's general environmental quality using a scale of poor, below average, average, above average, and excellent. Nearly sixty percent chose average.
- Respondents experienced the following problems with their drinking water: unpleasant taste, discoloration, and chemicals in water.
- Respondents cited several specific health problems related to the environment: stomach problems, breathing problems, cancer, and unexplained illnesses.

Awareness

- More than forty percent of the respondents were unfamiliar with environmental regulations, the agencies that deal with environmental issues, and whether environmental laws are enforced. The respondents were also not very familiar with NRCS services. However, the services they were most familiar with were soil surveys and assistance to communities to solve drainage problems.
- When asked if environmental justice is an issue in the community, 22 percent said it is definitely an issue, 33 percent said it is an issue, 22 percent said it was a small issue, and 23 percent said it was not an issue.

Assistance

- Respondents were asked to rate various agencies and institutions on environmental service with 1 being poor, 2 being fair, 3 being neutral, 4 being good, and 5 being excellent. No organization received a rating of 4 . The ratings were as follows: the Department of Agriculture (3.2), churches (3.0), colleges and universities (3.0), NRCS (2.8), and the Environmental Protection Agency (2.7).
- Respondents listed the barriers for NRCS in providing assistance as low agency visibility, strict program guidelines, and discrimination.
- The most beneficial NRCS services listed were water monitoring, marketing of agricultural products, and financial cost-share.
- Respondents listed their four preferences of being contacted as television, newsletter, radio, and printed materials. The lowest preferences were compact disk, conservation fair, and on-farm demonstration.

Specific Findings

- The most significant differences in responses were between respondents with incomes under \$30,000 and those who earn \$30,000 and above.
- Higher income respondents said the general environmental quality was average, while lower income respondents reported it as below average.
- In terms of service provided by agencies, higher income respondents rated agencies more favorably than lower income respondents.

- The most beneficial NRCS service to higher income respondents was water monitoring followed by soil survey. The most beneficial NRCS service to lower income respondents was also water monitoring followed by marketing of agricultural products.
- Caucasian respondents rated the overall community environmental quality significantly higher than African-American respondents.
- Caucasians rated environmental justice as less of an issue than did African-Americans. Overall, both groups indicated that environmental justice is a pressing issue in their communities.
- The two groups split on the issue of water systems. African-Americans rated drinking water as more of an issue than Caucasians; however, Caucasians rated stream water and lakes as more of an issue than African-Americans.
- Caucasians rated discrimination followed by agency visibility as NRCS barriers. African-Americans rated the largest barriers as agency visibility followed by program guidelines. Both groups rated NRCS as having more barriers than benefits when it comes to providing assistance to customers.
- The difference in responses between men and women were not great, however, women rated the environmental quality less favorably than men.
- Women rated air pollution as more of an issue than men did, while men rated soil erosion as a more serious issue than women did.
- Women also rated the services agencies provided lower than men, and women rated NRCS services as less beneficial than men.

Recommendations

1. Water quality programs should be targeted to these communities as it relates to water pollution, groundwater contamination, and flooding.
2. Further study is needed to explore environmental impact on human health specifically when it comes to stomach and breathing problems, cancer, and unexplained illnesses.
3. Assistance to Black Belt communities should be provided in terms of chemical runoff and flooding.
4. Drinking water is a problem in these communities. Assistance should address unpleasant taste, discoloration, and chemicals in water.

5. Agencies and institutions should market their environmental services to these communities so they will know whom to contact for assistance.
6. Customer service needs to be improved to residents of these communities.
7. NRCS needs to address the respondents' perception of program discrimination, difficult program guidelines, and lack of agency visibility.
8. NRCS should communicate to respondents through the mediums they prefer which are television, newsletter, and radio. Realistically television is too expensive so developing community newsletters on the environment could frame the issues, raise awareness and offer available assistance. To maximize effectiveness, there should be community input to the newsletter.
9. NRCS outreach efforts should target women and African-Americans as these groups rated the agency low in terms of visibility and access to programs.
10. Where possible, the agency should provide soil survey and water monitoring services since the residents felt they were beneficial. Laminate a soil survey book and provide it to community centers in low income and African-American communities.

Conclusion

Florence Robinson (1994) asserts that people who suffer environmental injustices are most often people of color and the poor. The data would support this theory since respondents earning less than \$30,000 as well as African-Americans rated their communities' environmental quality significantly less than the more affluent and Caucasian respondents did. Further analysis shows that more than half the African-Americans earned less than \$30,000.

It appears that the Black Belt residents in this survey are most concerned about water quality problems as well as health problems caused by adverse environmental impacts. NRCS is in a position to address many of the environmental concerns that surfaced during this initiative through outreach, technical assistance, locally-led conservation and watershed planning.