ABSTRACT

Agriculture's status as one of the nation's most hazardous occupations has been an impetus for a reexamination of the federal role in agricultural safety and for various proposals to make farming safer. During the 1970s congressional debate and farm group testimony that led to agriculture's current exemption from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's enforcement efforts, regulation foes made use of the "Agrarian Myth." The myth portrays farmers as the bedrock of democracy, suffering so that society may prosper and living a natural life away from the artificiality and evils of cities. Despite the inaccuracy of its images, the myth is a potent symbol in American culture, and its influence could arise again in current policy debates. This paper examines specific issues that may be obscured by the myth but that must be addressed in any agricultural safety policy debate. It then recommends that responses to agricultural safety be carefully considered and that value judgments about what the issues are, who would benefit, and who would bear the costs be explicitly discussed during debate.