

# Policy Council Role Description

Congratulations! You have just been elected to your community's Policy Council. Your new job is to govern a region with four farms, a town of 5,000 people, a river, wetlands, and wildlife. You made many promises in the campaign, and your constituents are waiting to see whether you will come through.

In *AgLand: The Game*, you will play through up to 20 years of agricultural policymaking, all the while examining the causes and consequences of your decisions. The prosperity of the families, the quality of the soil and water, and the health and survival of the wildlife are all influenced by the decisions you and the area's farmers make during these years. In the beginning, you don't know much about *AgLand* or about your new job. You will learn more as you watch and experience the consequences of your decisions.

## Your Objective

Your task is to create a political environment that satisfies both the people who live in town and the farmers who manage the land. Collectively, they all want good water quality, abundant and diverse wildlife populations, a reasonable and fair tax burden, and prosperous local farms. Individually, they might not be so all-encompassing in their desires.

## Your Decisions

Every two years, you must decide whether to regulate, tax, or offer payments for specific land uses or characteristics. Your decisions do not take effect until the next decision period. At the same time, farmers are choosing whether to plant corn and soybeans, alfalfa, or small grains; to use their fields for grazing; to put fields into the six-year Reserve program; or to sell fields to the Council. You'll enter your choices onto the Policy Council Decision Sheet.

**Taxes and Payments:** Each financial incentive (plus for payments, minus for taxes—usually measured in dollars/acre/year) can be targeted to specific types of fields (check the game board) or to specific crops/uses or practices. Your predecessors on the Council established a \$40/acre payment on all cropped fields, in order to supplement farm income and to stimulate food production.

**Reserve:** You can establish a paid or unpaid, voluntary or mandatory, six-year reserve program, whereby fields are "set aside" and do not generate income. These fields are

**AgLand™**  
the Game



planted to grasses that produce a great deal of wildlife.

**Regulations:** You can mandate or restrict some or all crops/uses on particular types of fields.

**Land Purchase:** You can offer to buy any field for a fixed price and then manage it as a wildlife habitat.

## The Political Process

During each round of play, your pollster will conduct a series of surveys. Through them, your constituents will let you know whether they are generally content, beginning to be unhappy, or completely dissatisfied. The five surveys are of farmers, taxpayers, hunters, wildlife enthusiasts, and water quality advocates.



Generally  
content



Beginning to  
be unhappy



Generally  
dissatisfied

## Special Council Roles

Each Council member should assume advocacy for one of these groups:

**Tax Watchdog:** At the start of the game, the Council is offering a fixed per-acre payment on all fields growing corn/soybeans or small grains. The community, however, has been putting pressure on you to lower taxes. You could do this by reducing expenditures (payments), raising revenues (taxes imposed on farmers), or by a combination of the two.

**Hunter:** There used to be a lot of wildlife in *AgLand*. But now, the wildlife you remember as a child is gone. Pheasants used to be everywhere, but now one sees only a few. You told the voters that you'd do something about this—both for the pleasure of local citizens and to attract more hunters to visit (and spend their money) in *AgLand*.

**Clean Water Advocate:** All the residents of *AgLand* agree that the river is too dirty. Sediment from surrounding fields has muddied their formerly clear stream. People

want you to do something about this. One relevant indicator is the topsoil delivery rate, tracked on your annual report. Another is your annual survey.

**Farm Advocate:** Even though most of the region's people live in town, they have been willing to be taxed to support the existing level of payments to farmers for growing crops. But farming is a risky business, even with these payments. In some years, revenues just do not equal expenditures. In addition, heightened concern about water quality and wildlife habitat threaten to result in regulations that restrict agricultural practices without compensation. Keep an eye on average farm income over the years. It tells you something about how farmers are doing.

**Wildlife Enthusiast:** You and your kids used to delight in all the wildlife you saw during your country walks. Your life was better then, because of these small pleasures. But most of the birds are gone, perhaps due to changes in agriculture. Your job—and your political career—depend on your restoring some wildlife diversity to the system.

## The Farms

Each of the four farms has eight 80-acre fields, as you can see on the game board. Although they are all the same size, each farm has a different combination of field types. Fields have different soil and slope characteristics, which affect their yields and potential for topsoil loss. They also vary in their proximity to the river and wetlands. You can determine these and other geographic features by looking at the game board. Farmers know a lot more about their land than you do.

## Average Price and Costs

Prices can fluctuate from the average, and yields can vary based on field characteristics and weather. Neither you nor the farmers can influence weather or crop prices. Farmers will know the yields from each of their fields, as well as their production costs—but you won't. The Regional Report, distributed to all parties before each decision period, contains information that might help you, too.

## Erosion and Water Quality

Soil loss is measured in units of tons per acre per year. The amount depends on the tillage method used, slope, and soil type (high- or low-productivity). Two effects of soil loss are of concern:

- If soil loss exceeds the soil replenishment rate, there is net loss of topsoil. When topsoil depth approaches

a minimum necessary for healthy crops, the yield of that field will go down. The soils in AgLand are really quite fragile in this regard.

- Some of the soil lost each year is delivered into the water system, where it can affect the water quality of the river or wetlands. This amount depends on the field's slope and proximity to water. This soil can reduce water quality by increasing the suspended particulates in the water and by building up as silt in the bottom of the river. It can take considerable time to clear this from the water system. Overall water quality is judged on a scale of 1 (bad) to 5 (good). Your survey reports will tell you what your constituents are thinking.

## Wildlife

People's opinion of the general health of wildlife in AgLand is based on the abundance of one species (pheasants) and the diversity of bird species they see.

Wildlife biologists have found that native prairie grasslands and wetlands (or Reserve lands planted to grass) give rise to the most pheasants. Very little of this habitat remains in AgLand. Grazed pastures produce fewer pheasants per acre than do grasslands; small grain fields produce even fewer, and corn/bean fields only a negligible number. Habitats adjacent to wetlands and the river boost productivity. Putting all fields into grass, however, isn't the optimal approach. Cereal grain fields (corn/beans and small grains) are an important food source for yearlong survival. A mix of 50% grass and 50% cereal grain fields is optimal for pheasant populations. Alfalfa fields are a special case, actually reducing the number of pheasants in the area, because they draw birds away from other habitats, only to have their nests destroyed during early cuttings.

Wildlife response to changed farm operations can take several years to reach full effect. The Wildlife Abundance Index, tracked in the regional report, is represented on a scale of 1 to 100% of the theoretical maximum for AgLand. Your own report will show the contribution of private and public lands to this indicator.

The diversity of birds is related to the size and variety of habitat types. Different species have different habitat requirements. (Birds are often a good indicator of trends in other wildlife species as well.) Again, grasslands are important, harboring the greater number of species (up to half the regional total). Grasslands and pastures adjacent to wetlands and watercourses provide habitat for additional wetland and riparian bird species. In addition, several rarer grassland birds require larger

habitats (“area sensitive birds”), reflected in AgLand by the number of grass fields per farm.

The Wildlife Diversity Index is represented on a scale of 1 to 100% of the theoretical maximum, and is influenced by the variety and amounts of different habitat types in the region. Your own report will show the relative prominence of three different sets of species: riparian/wetland birds, area-sensitive grassland birds, and common species. It’s up to you to learn more.

## **Reports**

Prior to each decision round, your accountant will provide you with a summary of your current financial condition, net farm income, net taxes per taxpayer, community attitudes, and a few environmental indicators. You’ll also want to check the Regional Report, a public compilation of other indicators of AgLand’s farmer and community well-being.

## **It’s Time to Start!**

You now know enough to start making decisions, but you probably don’t know enough yet to be able to predict with certainty the consequences of those decisions. It’s up to you to learn more, by starting to play AgLand: The Game.