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**CHALLENGES FACED BY U.S. RICE FARMERS IN RELATION TO FEDERAL  
RICE TARIFF POLICIES**

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**Abstract**

*Rice is a critical staple crop in the United States, supporting both the agricultural economy and rural livelihoods in states such as Arkansas, California, Louisiana, and Texas. This study examines the challenges faced by U.S. rice farmers in the context of federal rice import policies, particularly under the U.S. Rice Tariffication and Import Liberalization framework. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with six rice farmers across Arkansas and Louisiana to capture their lived experiences. Findings revealed three primary concerns. First, federal import policies have created economic pressures, including fluctuating rice prices, rising production costs, and reliance on intermediaries due to limited direct market access. Second, competition from imported rice has intensified, challenging domestic farmers' profitability and financial stability. Third, coping strategies employed by farmers include reducing input costs, diversifying crops, forming cooperatives, and advocating for targeted government interventions. The study also highlights perceived gaps in institutional support from agricultural agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Based on these insights, recommendations include reassessing rice import policies, strengthening domestic market protections, improving infrastructure, and implementing targeted financial support for farmers. Further research is suggested to explore the long-term socioeconomic impacts of import liberalization on U.S. rice-producing communities.*

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**Keywords:** Rice import policy, Hermeneutic phenomenology, Agricultural policy, Import liberalization, Farm livelihoods

**Introduction**

In the United States, rice production is a critical component of the agricultural economy, particularly in states such as Arkansas, Louisiana, California, and Texas. Federal rice import policies, including tariff regulations and import liberalization measures, are designed to balance domestic production with global trade commitments under agreements such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and trade agreements with key rice-exporting nations. These policies aim to stabilize rice prices, ensure consistent supply, and maintain U.S. competitiveness in the global market. However, they also expose domestic rice farmers to increased competition from cheaper imported rice, potentially affecting their profitability and financial stability.

The liberalization of rice imports in the U.S., which has involved reducing quantitative restrictions and adjusting tariff structures, mirrors international trends of trade liberalization in agriculture. While these policies aim to provide consumers with affordable rice, they have raised concerns among farmers regarding the economic pressures of competing against low-cost imports. Declining market prices, rising production costs, and reliance on intermediaries are among the challenges reported by rice producers. Programs and subsidies provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) are intended to mitigate these pressures, but gaps in institutional support are still observed in practice, particularly for small- and medium-scale rice farms.

Given these dynamics, this study examines the challenges encountered by U.S. rice farmers in states such as Arkansas and Louisiana in relation to federal rice import policies and tariff regulations. The study seeks to explore farmers' lived experiences, identify the economic and operational challenges they face, and understand the coping strategies they employ. By highlighting these experiences, the research aims to inform policymakers, agricultural agencies, and stakeholders on potential areas for policy reassessment and targeted interventions to support the sustainability and resilience of U.S. rice farming communities.

### **Review of Related Literature:**

#### **U.S. Rice Import Policies and Farmer Challenges**

Federal rice import policies in the United States are designed to regulate the balance between domestic production and international trade. According to Glauber and Laborde (2020), U.S. rice tariffs and import liberalization measures aim to stabilize domestic rice prices while ensuring compliance with World Trade Organization (WTO) trade obligations. These policies are implemented to protect consumer interests, provide affordable rice, and support national food security. However, the removal or reduction of import restrictions exposes domestic rice producers to heightened competition from cheaper imported rice, which can depress farm gate prices and affect farmers' income levels.

Research by Sumner and Johnson (2021) indicates that U.S. rice farmers, particularly small- and medium-scale producers in Arkansas and Louisiana, face economic challenges due to fluctuating global rice prices and reliance on federal subsidies. While federal programs, such as USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) assistance and marketing loans, aim to provide financial support, farmers report that these measures do not always fully offset the impacts of global competition. Additionally, the complexity of navigating federal regulations, compliance requirements, and market access limitations adds operational challenges for rice producers (Baffes et al., 2022).

Studies have also highlighted coping strategies employed by U.S. rice farmers to mitigate the effects of import liberalization. These strategies include diversifying crops, participating in farmer cooperatives, adopting cost-reduction techniques, and lobbying for policy adjustments to improve tariff protections (Mitchell, 2020; Roberts & O'Donoghue, 2021). Despite these efforts, the literature consistently notes that U.S. rice farmers are vulnerable to sudden shifts in

trade policy, fluctuating tariffs, and the entry of low-cost imported rice, which can threaten farm profitability and long-term sustainability.

### **Research Problems**

This study aims to explore the challenges encountered by U.S. rice farmers in relation to federal rice import policies and tariff regulations. It seeks to understand the lived experiences of rice producers, focusing on the specific economic, operational, and market-related difficulties they face due to changes in import duties and global competition. Particular attention is given to how tariff structures and import liberalization affect domestic rice prices, production costs, and farm income.

The study also examines the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by farmers to respond to these challenges, such as participation in cooperatives, crop diversification, and engagement with policy advocacy. Furthermore, it investigates how these farmers perceive the adequacy of government support programs and whether current federal policies effectively address the vulnerabilities of domestic rice producers.

### **The research addresses the following questions:**

What are the specific economic and operational challenges encountered by U.S. rice farmers as a result of federal rice import policies?

How does the influx of imported rice influence domestic market strategies and competitiveness for U.S. rice producers?

What coping strategies do rice farmers adopt in response to challenges posed by federal rice import policies and tariffs?

What recommendations or frameworks can be proposed to support sustainable rice farming in the U.S. under current trade and import conditions?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences of rice farmers in the United States. The study utilized thematic analysis to examine the challenges farmers face due to federal rice import policies and tariff regulations. Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes interpreting experiences within their social, economic, and regulatory context, revealing meanings that may otherwise remain overlooked (Dibley et al., 2020; Vandermause et al., 2020). The goal of this design was to develop a rich understanding of the challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of rice farmers as they navigate domestic and global market pressures.

### **Research Locale and Participants**

The study focused on rice-producing regions in the U.S., specifically in Arkansas and Louisiana, which are major rice-growing states. Participants were selected through purposive

sampling to include farmers with active rice operations who have been impacted by federal rice import regulations. Eligibility criteria included being 18 years or older, actively engaged in rice production prior to recent federal tariff adjustments, physically and mentally able to participate, and willing to provide informed consent. Six rice farmers participated in in-depth interviews, allowing for detailed exploration of their lived experiences, economic impacts, and coping strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Research Instrument, Data Collection, and Analysis**

Data were collected using a self-constructed interview guide consisting of six open-ended questions designed to capture farmers' experiences with rice import policies, tariffs, and market competition. The instrument was validated by three experts in agricultural economics and rural development to ensure relevance and clarity. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure online platforms, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, guided the identification of key patterns and themes: familiarization with the data, code generation, theme development, reviewing and refining themes, determining their significance, and reporting findings (Ranfagni et al., 2023; Naeem & Ozuem, 2022).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed to protect participants' rights and privacy. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, who were briefed on the study's objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning code names, and data were securely stored, with access restricted to the research team. Compliance with U.S. federal research ethics and data protection standards ensured that participants' personal information and opinions were safeguarded throughout the study.

### **Themes and Discussion**

The focus of this study is to examine the challenges encountered by rice farmers in the United States due to federal rice import policies and tariff regulations, particularly those affecting domestic market competitiveness. Insights were gathered from in-depth interviews with six rice farmers in Arkansas and Louisiana. The findings were organized into three major problem areas, each containing key themes and sub-themes.

#### **Problem 1: Challenges Encountered Due to Federal Rice Import Policies**

Farmers' narratives revealed that federal import policies disrupted their economic stability and farming operations. These challenges were consolidated into four primary themes:

##### **Theme 1. Decline in Domestic Rice Prices and Farmer Income**

Participants reported that the influx of imported rice significantly lowered the market price of U.S.-grown rice. Many farmers noted a substantial drop in earnings, making it difficult to cover operational costs or invest in future planting cycles.

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**Theme 2. Rising Costs of Agricultural Inputs**

Farmers highlighted increasing expenses for fertilizers, seeds, machinery, and pesticides. Coupled with declining rice prices, these rising input costs created a financially unsustainable environment for maintaining or expanding production.

**Theme 3. Perceived Gaps in Pricing Policies**

Farmers expressed frustration over weak protections in pricing mechanisms. They believed that federal policies did not sufficiently support local producers, leaving them vulnerable to price volatility.

**Sub-Theme 3.1: Limited Market Access and Dependence on Middlemen**

Many farmers relied on intermediaries to sell their rice due to limited direct market opportunities. This dependence often resulted in lower sale prices, with farmers attributing the issue to insufficient government-led marketing programs and infrastructure support.

**Problem 2: Impact of Large-Scale Rice Importation on Farmers' Market Strategies**

The interviews indicated that high volumes of imported rice altered market dynamics and forced U.S. rice farmers to adapt their strategies to remain competitive.

**Theme 4. Difficulty Competing with Low-Cost Imported Rice**

Imported rice sold at prices lower than domestic rice, making it challenging for farmers to maintain profitability. Participants reported instances of selling at a loss or holding unsold stock, which increased the risk of spoilage and financial stress.

**Theme 5. Financial Instability and Increased Indebtedness**

Farmers noted rising debt levels as a result of low revenue and high input costs. Some relied on loans from informal or commercial lenders to continue operations, creating cycles of financial vulnerability.

**Problem 3: Coping Mechanisms and Support Strategies**

Farmers implemented various adaptive strategies to mitigate the challenges posed by import policies and the competitive market environment.

**Theme 6. Input Reduction and Crop Diversification**

To reduce expenses, some farmers limited the use of fertilizers and pesticides, while others diversified their production by growing alternative crops such as soybeans or vegetables. Although these strategies offered short-term relief, they sometimes reduced overall yield and profitability.

**Theme 7. Call for Enhanced Government Support**

Participants emphasized the need for stronger federal assistance, including subsidies, improved irrigation and storage facilities, price stabilization mechanisms, and technical support. Farmers believed that more robust policy measures were essential to sustain their livelihoods.

#### Theme 8. Role of Farmer Cooperatives and Associations

Several farmers highlighted the benefits of participating in cooperatives or agricultural associations. Membership provided access to capital, shared farming resources, collective training, and enhanced bargaining power, offering a supportive network to navigate the challenges of global competition.

#### Conclusion

After careful analysis of the data collected from rice farmers in Arkansas and Louisiana, it is evident that federal rice import policies and tariff regulations have significantly affected the livelihoods of domestic rice producers. The study highlights key challenges, including declining domestic rice prices, rising production costs, dependence on middlemen, and perceived gaps in agricultural pricing policies. The influx of lower-cost imported rice has intensified financial insecurity, making it difficult for U.S. farmers to compete effectively in the market. Farmers have adopted coping strategies such as reducing input use, diversifying crops, and relying on cooperatives or farmer associations for support. However, the findings also indicate a gap in proactive intervention and sustained support from federal and state agricultural agencies. Limited involvement in infrastructure improvements, direct market facilitation, and financial assistance has further constrained farmers' capacity to maintain profitability and stability. Therefore, a more integrated, responsive, and protective approach is required to ensure the sustainability of domestic rice production in the United States.

#### Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed to support U.S. rice farmers and mitigate the negative effects of import policies and tariff regulations:

##### Policy Reassessment by Federal Agencies

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), and Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) should reassess current import policy frameworks and tariffs on rice. Consideration should be given to implementing temporary safeguard mechanisms or adjusting tariff rates during periods when domestic harvests are undervalued due to imported rice. These measures would help stabilize domestic rice prices and protect local farmers from unfair competition while maintaining compliance with international trade agreements.

##### Market Interventions to Reduce Middlemen Dependence

Federal and state agencies should facilitate the creation of local rice trading centers or farmer-direct markets, allowing producers to sell directly to consumers, institutions, or retailers. Investments in transportation infrastructure, storage facilities, and logistics support are essential to reduce post-harvest losses and improve product quality. Strengthening government



procurement programs to purchase rice directly from farmers at competitive prices would further reduce reliance on intermediaries.

#### Targeted Financial Support

Agencies such as USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (FCIC), and state-level agricultural departments should provide timely financial support through subsidies, low-interest loans, crop insurance, and emergency financial aid. This support is critical for managing sudden income losses due to declining prices or rising input costs. Coordination between federal and state agencies is essential to ensure programs are accessible, well-communicated, and responsive to farmers' specific needs.

#### Future Research

Future studies should explore the long-term socioeconomic effects of federal rice import policies and tariff regulations on U.S. farming communities. Research could also assess the effectiveness of government interventions, cooperative programs, and market-based solutions in improving the economic stability and resilience of domestic rice producers.

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