

FARM BILL 2007: A CITIZEN'S GUIDE

Every five years, Congress revisits and passes a multi-billion-dollar, little-understood piece of legislation known as the Farm Bill. 2007 is one of those years, and if things play out the way they're headed, this could become the most scrutinized food and farm policy debate in recent history.

Originally conceived as an emergency bailout for millions of farmers and unemployed during the dark times of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, the Farm Bill has snowballed into one of the most, if not the most, significant forces affecting food, farming, and land use in the United States. It might seem hard to fathom that a single piece of legislation could wield such far-reaching powers—but to a large extent, the Farm Bill determines what sort of foods we Americans eat, how they taste, how much they cost, which crops are grown under what conditions, and ultimately, whether we're properly nourished or not.

What is the Farm Bill?

The Farm Bill is essentially a \$90 billion tax bill for food, feed, fiber, and more recently, fuel. Each bill receives a formal name, such as the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 or the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (a.k.a. "Freedom to Farm"), but more often each act is simply referred to as "the Farm Bill."

While many people equate its programs and subsidies with assistance for struggling family farmers, the Farm Bill actually has two primary thrusts and expenditures, which account for 85 percent of its budget:

- Food stamps, school lunches, and other nutrition programs account for 50 percent of current spending—an average of \$44 billion per year between 2000 and 2006.
- Income and price supports for a number of storable commodity crops combine for another 35 percent of spending.

In addition to these two major pieces of the pie, the Farm Bill funds a range of other program "titles," including conservation and environment, forestry, renewable energy, research and rural development.

For decades, Farm Bill negotiations have been dominated by a tag-team of two powerful interest groups. The "farm bloc" (commodity state representatives along with the agribusiness lobby) has orchestrated a quid pro quo with the antihunger caucus (urban representatives aligned with hunger advocacy groups). As a result, ever-increasing payments have been directed toward surplus commodity production (e.g. corn, wheat, cotton) and the livestock feedlot industry. In return, the Farm Bill's desperately needed hunger safety net programs have survived relatively unscathed.

Why Does the Farm Bill Matter?

If you pay taxes, care about the nutritional values of school lunches, worry about the plight of biodiversity and wildlife or the loss of farmland and open space, you have a personal stake in the tens of billions of dollars annually committed to agriculture and food policies. If you're concerned about escalating federal budget deficits, the fate of family farmers, a food system dominated by corporations and commodities, unfair trade policies, pesticide use, conditions of immigrant farm workers, the state of the country's woodlands, or the marginalization of locally raised organic food and grassfed meat and dairy products, you should pay attention to the Farm Bill. There are dozens more reasons why the Farm Bill is critical to our land, our bodies and our children's future. Some include:

- The twilight of the cheap oil age and onset of unpredictable climatic conditions;
- Looming water shortages and falling fish populations;
- Broken rural economies;
- Euphoria over corn and soybean expansion for biofuels;
- Escalating medical and economic costs of obesity;
- Record payouts to corporate farms that aren't even losing money without subsidies;
- More than 35 million Americans, half of them children, who don't get enough to eat.

As longtime North Dakota organic farmer and food activist Fred Kirschenmann writes, "The farm policies we design now will likely determine whether we will continue to have a sustainable food system in the future." Though the economic challenges of modern agriculture may seem abstract to many urban and suburban residents, he argues, "An enlightened food and farm policy is of considerable consequence to every citizen on the planet."

Who Gets the Money?

Thanks to a growing number of resources, following the Farm Bill money trail is not that difficult. (Environmental Working Group, Oxfam International, the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, and Environmental Defense all provide excellent information; *The Washington Post* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* are also good places to start.) According to the Congressional Research Service, 84 percent of commodity support spending goes to the production of just five crops: corn, cotton, wheat, rice, and soybeans. Half of that money currently goes to just seven states that produce most of those commodities. Most vegetables and fruits are not subsidized. The



richest ten percent of farm-subsidy recipients (many of which are corporations and absentee landowners and can hardly be classified as “actively engaged” in growing crops) take in more than two-thirds of those payments. Also consider:

- Almost 50 percent of all commodity subsidies went to just 5 percent of eligible farmers in 2005.
- Subsidies help the largest farms to acquire the best land and squeeze out the smaller growers.
- The growth rate for jobs trailed the national average in nearly two-thirds of counties receiving heavy subsidies between 2000 and 2003.
- 74% of farmers who want to participate in environmental stewardship programs are turned away due to lack of funds.

What about the Food Pyramid?

Very little of all the agriculture we subsidize is directly edible, at least by humans. Out of the hundreds and even thousands of plant and animal species that have been cultivated for human use, the Farm Bill favors just four primary groups: food grains, feed grains, oilseeds and upland cotton. Most are either fed to cattle in confinement or processed into oils, flours, starches, sugars or other industrial food additives.

It only takes a stroll down the supermarket aisles to understand how Farm Bill dollars impact the country’s food chain. A dollar buys hundreds more calories in the snack food, cereal and soda aisles than it does in the produce section. Why? Because the Farm Bill favors the mega-production of corn and soybeans, rather than regional supplies of fresh vegetables, healthy fruits and nuts.

While the USDA’s Food Pyramid emphasizes the nutritional advantages of eating five daily servings of fruits and vegetables, Farm Bill funding for diversified row crop and orchard farming remains relatively disconnected from the balanced, healthy diet that nutritionists endorse. Meanwhile, most consumer food dollars spent in farm country end up leaving the region because

our agricultural areas have effectively become “food deserts.”

There is at least one simple solution to this. Farm and food subsidy programs could be realigned to support the federal dietary guidelines and reoriented toward food chains that produce and distribute locally grown, healthy foods.

What Can We Do?

The silver lining is that Americans actually do have a substantially large food and farm policy program to debate. Conditions for change have perhaps never been better, as market dynamics and public awareness align to create uncertainty about farm politics as usual. Indeed, the Farm Bill matters because it can actually serve as the economic engine driving small-scale entrepreneurship, on-farm research, species protection, nutritional assistance, school lunches made from scratch, regional development and habitat restoration, to name just a few.

Our challenge is not to abolish government supports altogether, but to ensure that those subsidies we do legislate actually serve as investments in the country’s future and allow us to live up to our obligations in the global community. How we get there is a work in progress. But most observers agree that the era of massive giveaways to corporations and surplus commodity producers must yield to policies that reward stewardship, promote healthy diets, secure regional economies and do no harm to family farms or hungry citizens.

“Today, because so few realize that we citizens have a dog in this fight,” writes Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, “our legislators feel free to leave the debate over the Farm Bill to the farm states, very often trading their votes on agricultural policy for votes on issues that matter more to their constituents. But nothing could do more to reform America’s food system, and by doing so, improve the condition of America’s environment and public health, than if the rest of us were to weigh in.”

Dan Imhoff is the author and publisher of numerous books, including Farming with the Wild, Paper or Plastic and Building with Vision. His most recent book, Food Fight: The Citizen’s Guide to a Food and Farm Bill was released in February 2007 by Watershed Media.

JOIN THE FOOD FIGHT

For a comprehensive list of things you can do—and local and national organizations that are actively involved, go to edibleaustin.com

Flex Your Vote. Write your representatives and tell them not to trade their votes on farm bills or annual spending bills related to food and farm policy. Contact information at congress.org.

Get Up, Stand Up. Press for campaign-finance and lobbying reform as well as anti-trust enforcement to challenge Big Food’s influence on food and farm policy.

Build Bridges. Try to understand the concerns and common interests of other groups in your area. Look for unifying public benefits such as renewable energy, a vibrant family farm economy, hunger relief, school health and nutrition, the protection of open space and social justice.