

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FARM BILL

Farm Bill FAQ

Here is some basic information about the U.S. Farm Bill in its current form, and its potential to equitably address a range of issues, from hunger and health, to sustainable agriculture and strengthening local food systems in a way that can mutually benefit farmers and consumers, urban and rural.

What is the Farm Bill?

The Farm Bill is a collection of legislation related to agriculture production, food distribution and hunger. Established in 1949 in the wake of the Great Depression and Dust Bowls, the original goal of the bill was to protect farmers and stabilize rural economies. Over the years, its goal has broadened and it now covers a wide variety of issues such as crop subsidies, food stamps, agricultural trade and marketing, rural development, land conservation, and agricultural disaster relief. Each of these areas is covered by different sections of the bill, called *titles*. Approximately 91% of money spent on Farm Bill programs goes to two titles: 55% for food stamps and 36% for subsidies. As you might guess, this gives a lot of influence to anti-hunger and subsidy advocates. The bill is reviewed and rewritten by Congress every 4-6 years. The current Farm Bill was passed in 2002 and will expire in September of 2007, at which point Congress will need to either replace it with a rewritten Farm Bill or extend the existing bill.

Why is the Farm Bill important?

The Farm Bill is what determines the quality, quantity, price and type of food available in the US. The Farm Bill is about so much more than just farming; just a few examples include providing food to the hungry, paying farmers to farm in a way that protects the land and water, providing training for farmers to market their products, creating grants to educate consumers on the advantages of biodiesel, helping protect family farms from bankruptcy, and even providing high-speed broadband internet access for rural residents. It has the potential to improve health and promote equity, innovation and entrepreneurship, local food and strong communities.

What are Agricultural Subsidies?

When people refer to agricultural subsidies, they're usually referring to commodity payments. Title I of the Farm Bill provides money to support producers of specific staple crops, which are frequently referred to as *commodities*. These include cotton, wheat, corn, soybeans, tobacco, rice, and feed grains, among others. Many of these crops were originally chosen in part because they are storable and primarily used as feed for livestock. Originally these programs provided farmers with support so they could store their grain and sell it when they could get a good price for it, to resolve the issue of the markets being flooded during harvest time, which would push down the price. When used correctly, the programs ensured that farmers received a fair price for their crops and stabilized the supply of staple crops available in the marketplace. Over the last 20 years, however, the subsidy programs have changed substantially. Farmers no longer receive support to store their crops and are now forced to sell them when they are harvested, which floods the market and pushes down the price. Government payments now promote, rather than discourage, this practice by paying farmers the difference between the depressed market price and the cost of production. Who benefits from this system? A small number of multinational agribusiness corporations that distribute and trade commodity crops, especially grains used as feed for animals. This system ensures the livestock industry has a steady supply of cheap feed for their animals and keeps the cost of meat low. Subsidized crops also compose the majority of ingredients used in low-cost, highly processed foods. Corn subsidies, for example, enable corn to be sold at a price lower than the equivalent amount of sugar, which is why corn syrup and high fructose corn syrup are frequently used as sweeteners.

What are Specialty Crops?

Here in California, a lot of talk about agriculture focuses on specialty crops. Specialty crops are minimally processed, perishable crops that are not designated in the Farm Bill as commodities. These include most fruits, vegetables, and nuts. The commodity payments described above do not exist for specialty crops; while the government is heavily subsidizing corn, grains, and other crops that go into low-cost processed foods with questionable nutrition value, there are no equivalent support programs for fresh fruits and vegetables, which are the staple for good health. The small amount of support that's available for Specialty Crops comes through marketing programs, conservation programs, and nutritional programs such as the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program, which provides free fruit and vegetable snacks to schoolchildren. While some groups advocate that the answer to this imbalance is to just create payment programs for specialty growers so they can be even with other commodity programs, CFJC and other sustainable food system organizations advocate for a new farm policy that ensures farmers a fair price for everything they grow, ensures consumers equal access to affordable healthy foods, and does not disadvantage farmers in other countries.

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How can the Farm Bill encourage schools and other public institutions to buy local?

Farm to Cafeteria programs connect institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, and public agencies with local farmers to supply food for their cafeterias. The Farm Bill is an opportunity to finally provide funding to the Access to Local Foods and School Gardens program which was created in 2004 but has never received funding. One of the first steps could be to provide funding for the Access to Local Foods and School Gardens, which covers the startup and organizing costs of Farm to Cafeteria projects. The Farm Bill also needs to address inconsistencies in policy; while there are several new programs that support Farm to School, current rules do not allow institutions to specify that they want local when doing food purchasing. Federal rules need to provide greater flexibility to other food assistance programs to purchase local foods where practicable.

How does the Farm Bill address diet-related disease and healthy eating, and what more can it do?

Currently, the Nutrition Title provides funding for emergency food assistance through Food Stamps, WIC, food banks, and other programs. While these programs provide basic sustenance to address hunger needs, there are few programs in the Farm Bill that address the quality of food available and encourage healthy eating. There is tremendous potential for the Farm Bill to encourage healthy eating by: expanding the scope and funding allotments for the few existing programs; increasing access to fresh, minimally processed foods; and supporting greater fruit and vegetable consumption. Existing programs include the Farmer's Market Nutrition Program, which provides coupons for low-income seniors and mothers with infants and small children to use at Farmer's Markets, the Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program, and the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program. The Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program especially has the potential to benefit a large number of people with innovative, community-based nutrition interventions that address environmental barriers to healthy eating, if the Farm Bill returns some of the flexibility it had prior to a change in Federal guidelines in 2004. Continued support of Farm to School programs would encourage children to eat healthily by enabling them to enjoy higher quality foods, which they will then eat more of on their own. Also, the variety of foods provided by USDA through food assistance programs need to be consistent with Federal dietary guidelines.

How can the Farm Bill increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables?

The Farm Bill could be an excellent tool in addressing the problem of food deserts, a term used to describe communities that do not have adequate places in the community to buy healthy foods. The Farm Bill could provide grants and loans for community-based planning and financing for grocery stores, farmers' markets and community gardens. These efforts increase opportunities for people to purchase healthy foods in their communities and create new markets for farmers. To address the difficulties growers have in meeting the increasing demand for locally grown foods, the Farm Bill needs to invest in vital infrastructure such as slaughtering and processing facilities, warehouses, and storage and distribution capacity. Creating Farm Bill programs that invest in such infrastructure would help connect farmers with local consumers.

How can the Farm Bill benefit urban agriculture?

Urban agriculture is still misunderstood and undervalued by many people, which is reflected in the lack of support from the Farm Bill. Generally, the Farm Bill could lend it legitimacy through language use and by targeting urban farms as a potential source for food. Specific programs supporting urban agriculture are practically nonexistent, with the exception of Community Food Projects grant program, which supports innovative food system approaches to both market development for producers and access to healthy foods in low-income communities. Increased funding for this program and the creation of new programs in the Farm Bill would enable more communities to benefit from urban agriculture. Another opportunity is to provide urban farmers with technical support similar to what rural farmers receive from Cooperative Extension Agents. The Cooperative Extension System, which is a partnership between land grant universities and community entities providing research-based, educational materials to help agriculture-related efforts, is another potential source of support for urban agriculture; agents with urban agriculture expertise could be placed in urban areas.

Further Reading

Environmental Working Group's Farm Subsidy Database: <http://www.ewg.org/farm/>

RAFI-USA's Non-Work Guide to Understanding Federal Commodity Payments:

<http://www.rafiusa.org/pubs/nonworkguide>

Food Security Learning Center: <http://www.worldhungeryear.org/fslc/>

Community Food Security Coalition on the Farm and Food Policy Project:

<http://www.foodsecurity.org/policy.html#FFPP>

California Department of Food & Agriculture on the Farm Bill: <http://www.cdfa.ca.gov/farmbill07/>

Get involved in making the Farm Bill serve the needs of all Californians

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