

Putting Food Into Farming: How to Fix the Farm Bill

– Susan Sechler and Joe Guinan

Conclusion

“It should be the aim of every young farmer to do not only as well as his father, but to do his best; “to make two blades of grass grow where but one grew before.”

— *Isaac Newton,*
first Commissioner of the newly-formed
U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 1864

Farm-state legislators and commodity groups are gearing up for the 2007 farm bill. Rather than propose new legislation to replace the 2002 bill, which is set to expire, they are pushing for a “simple” two-year extension of current programs. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” they say. “Our farmers think the 2002 farm bill was the biggest success ever.”

The 2002 farm bill has succeeded in keeping a few wealthy U.S. farmers happy. The campaign contributions of those cheery farmers, the commodity PACs and corporations keep key lawmakers happy. That success aside, in every other way U.S. farm policies are wasteful, unfair, and destructive of other national aims.

Those are tough words, but an understatement. The damage done by U.S. farm policy increases with each passing farm bill. While the world and its needs change rapidly—and the needs of agriculture change just as dramatically—we merely tinker with reforming our farm programs. Thus they remain, in essence, what they were when they debuted in 1933 in the depths of the Great Depression. Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace apologetically introduced them as “a temporary solution to deal with an emergency.”

That emergency bill’s most enduring provisions, the so-called commodity programs (actually covering only a handful of crops), remain unchanged despite dramatic changes in consumer tastes, needs, and markets. At their heart is the federal government’s assumed responsibility to protect the growing abundance of farm production from the vagaries of nature and from world markets through a complex system of production-related subsidies. The noise of coins pouring from the federal purse

muffles the signals of market demand and other changing realities.

Imagine a Food Policy

Today, when three out of every five Americans are overweight, farm-state legislators have continued to “serve the public” by producing farm policies that support more production of those commodities. In the 15 farm bills to date, beginning with the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, the word food has been in the bill’s title only five times, most recently in 1990.

Imagine having a food policy instead of a farm production policy. Then our government would be promoting nutritional health rather than promoting more production and then using taxpayer dollars to find new ways to get people to consume that production. Commodity policies would become a subset of food policies, rather than today’s situation, whereby the cart of commodities leads the horse of nutritional needs.

Earl Butz, that most colorful and most vilified of Agriculture Secretaries, is famous for linking agriculture’s future to the conventions of industrial efficiency. More than three decades ago, his advice to farmers was that they should “plant fencerow-to-fencerow,” and “get big or get out.” These dictums not only sum up the vision of industrial efficiency in farming, they are in the very DNA of current farm programs. But Thomas Jefferson’s yeomen farmers are all dead and gone, and they are not coming back.

Many of us cherish the values of family, community and individual initiative represented by the family farm. Many of us believe that we are better off with an agricultural system—indeed, an economy—where economic power is widely shared. So we mourn the passing of the

traditional family farm. But if we fail to accept it as a reality, we could lose our chance to influence the future of rural America, the health of our population, the well-being of farm families, our food system, and our role in the world. Let us then strive to put rural areas, a healthy population, an improved food system, and



Hilary Doran

responsible global leadership toward the top rather than the bottom of farm policy concerns. And while we cannot legislate the family farm back into existence, we can at least remove the bias of current programs toward ever more concentration.

The Closed World of the Farm Bill

The roots of the farm bill go 80 years deep. Despite a mounting list of problems, farm-state legislators have been amazingly successful at

resisting changes to the farm bill's basic premises and core purpose. Whenever they are pressured to expand the farm bill to accommodate a new constituency or target group, their reaction has been to paste on additional titles—be it food stamps, conservation, research, or agricultural trade.

New constituencies may get into the farm bill, but then they immediately get steamrolled by the commodity interests. Historically, the advocates for food stamps or conservation have always had to strike deals with the commodity interests to get through even a sliver of their agendas. Half a loaf has, understandably, been better than none. But this process has left the commodity title not only intact, but growing.

Reform is resisted by protecting commodity interests from competition, from broader policy development, and from public opinion. Efforts to inject a little transparency into the legislative process to ensure a balance of interests are swiftly vanquished. However, there was at least one moment when things might have turned out differently. It can help us understand what might happen with an open process in which all the constituents—including farmers—participate and are heard.

The People Speak—Once

When Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976, he appointed three-term Minnesota congressman Bob Bergland as Secretary of Agriculture. Bergland's agricultural experience in Congress—reeling from one crisis to the next, patching and plugging without a clear sense of who would and should benefit from farm programs—caused him to question some of the fundamental

assumptions of farm policy. These included the basic focus on “unit price” and the recourse to emergency bailouts that had long dominated federal thinking, even though there was no longer one single price level that would be good for everyone and the “emergencies” had become an annual event.

Bergland became convinced that good farm policy—particularly good family farm policy—should no longer be primarily about propping up the price of agricultural commodities. Additionally, although they would remain important, farmers should no longer claim central space in a progressive food and agriculture policy. Instead, the focus should be on a system leading to good nutrition and health for the whole population.

As a deeply religious man, Secretary Bergland also believed that the dominant role of the United States in international grain markets, and the special responsibility this role conferred, meant that there was a moral imperative to look at solutions to world hunger. He believed that U.S. agriculture policy could play an important role in world peace.

Bergland was determined that the 1981 farm bill would move toward a more coherent agriculture policy with a clear, honest purpose and direction. In 1979, speaking at the annual convention of the National Farmers Union in Kansas City, he stunned his audience by calling for a national dialogue on the future of agriculture. How had American agriculture developed in the way it had? Had it really promoted family farmers, or contributed to their demise? Was it what people wanted? If not, what was the role of the federal government in effecting change?

He told the staff at USDA that

no subject should be considered off-limits. If the federal tax code affected the structure of agriculture, then he wanted it explored. The “Structure Project” was born. That fall, Bergland conducted all-day public hearings in 10 regions, during which—unlike in traditional “listening sessions”—he reached out not only to farmers but to other rural residents. He wanted to hear directly from environmentalists, consumers, businesspeople, clergy and others who were affected.

Thousands of people attended and thousands more wrote in. This was to be the first farm bill with such a broad constituent base: lots of people figuring out how to build common ground around new goals based on longstanding values and to pursue these goals with more efficient and fairer programs. The 1981 farm bill process was to move away from the endless testimony and negotiations on support price, exports, and budget constraints, embracing instead a new way of thinking that would bring new constituencies and wider interests to the table.

Then, of course, things fell apart. In 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Bergland agreed to an embargo on trade in grain with the Soviet Union. The Iranian hostage crisis continued to unfold. In the 1980 presidential election, Ronald Reagan defeated Carter. Bergland’s team at USDA issued their report anyway, in January 1981, on their way out the door.¹

Fight to the Finish

Today, more than ever, we need a food policy that recognizes the legitimate interests of all—farmers, consumers, nutrition, health, the country, and the growing food challenge facing the world—within

economically and politically acceptable bounds. Our investments in the food system should promote our public policy goals, not frustrate them.

So, what should we do?

First, we must work to free agriculture from a sterile and meaningless attachment to conventional notions of industrial efficiency, and place the consumer and the environment in which we live at the center of food policy. We can

to perform efficiently and reliably with far less government intervention than today. The interventions that government does undertake must be aimed at supporting farmers to run businesses that respond to market signals, stay in tune with the safety and health concerns of their customers, reduce damage to the environment, and produce a product people want to buy.

Third, we should fight the farm subsidy structure. No compromise.



The 2007 farm bill debate is expected to focus much greater attention on rural development than it received in the 2002 bill. Small business development for depressed rural communities should be a priority.

no longer tolerate food policies that are derivatives of bad farm policies—that reduce the role of the public to surplus consumers of last resort, while putting farmers on a production treadmill that makes it impossible for them to adequately consider quality and safety and condemning the world’s hungry people to a hungry future.

Second, we must replace the myth of the family farm with the reality of farm businesses that are good for families. The large farms that produce most of our food should not be afforded special treatment through nostalgia for a “way of life,” but rather should be expected

No buying off. We should work with members of Congress who are not beholden to the special interests of big agriculture. We should reach out to state officials, particularly governors, who can be persuaded that rural development block grants would be better overall for their states—and for their political future—than just supporting the status quo. Organizing at the state level will be critical. The Structure Project was correct: agriculture varies dramatically from place to place, and from crop to crop. The Washington lobby for commodity interests is far more single-minded in its defense of subsidies than are most farmers.

The Farm and Food Policy Project: Restoring Balance to the U.S. Agricultural and Food System

– Allen Hance

A diverse coalition of family farm, rural, public health, anti-hunger, conservation, faith-based, and other groups is forming to shape the 2007 farm bill—on a scale unprecedented in the history of farm policy debate. The cross-sector approach of the Farm and Food Policy Project (FFPP) reflects a commitment to advocate for policies that address the full spectrum of public needs addressed by this critical piece of legislation. This broad and growing coalition believes that by working together, we can make real progress toward supporting family farms and local communities, improving health and nutrition, ending hunger, increasing biodiversity, and improving the quality of our soil, water and air.

Underlying the project's dialogue is a shared set of beliefs and values:

- A widespread and diverse family farm system benefits rural communities and society as a whole;
- Extensive hunger and food insecurity in the United States are unacceptable;
- Strong stewardship commitments are key to maintaining farm and food systems that will promote environmental and public health for our children's generation;
- Stimulating new markets and restoring competition in the marketplace are vital to a fair, sustainable food system;
- Rectifying historic patterns of discrimination and making farm and food policies more responsive to an increasingly diverse society are critically important;
- Rural and urban communities can work together to create a healthier food system.



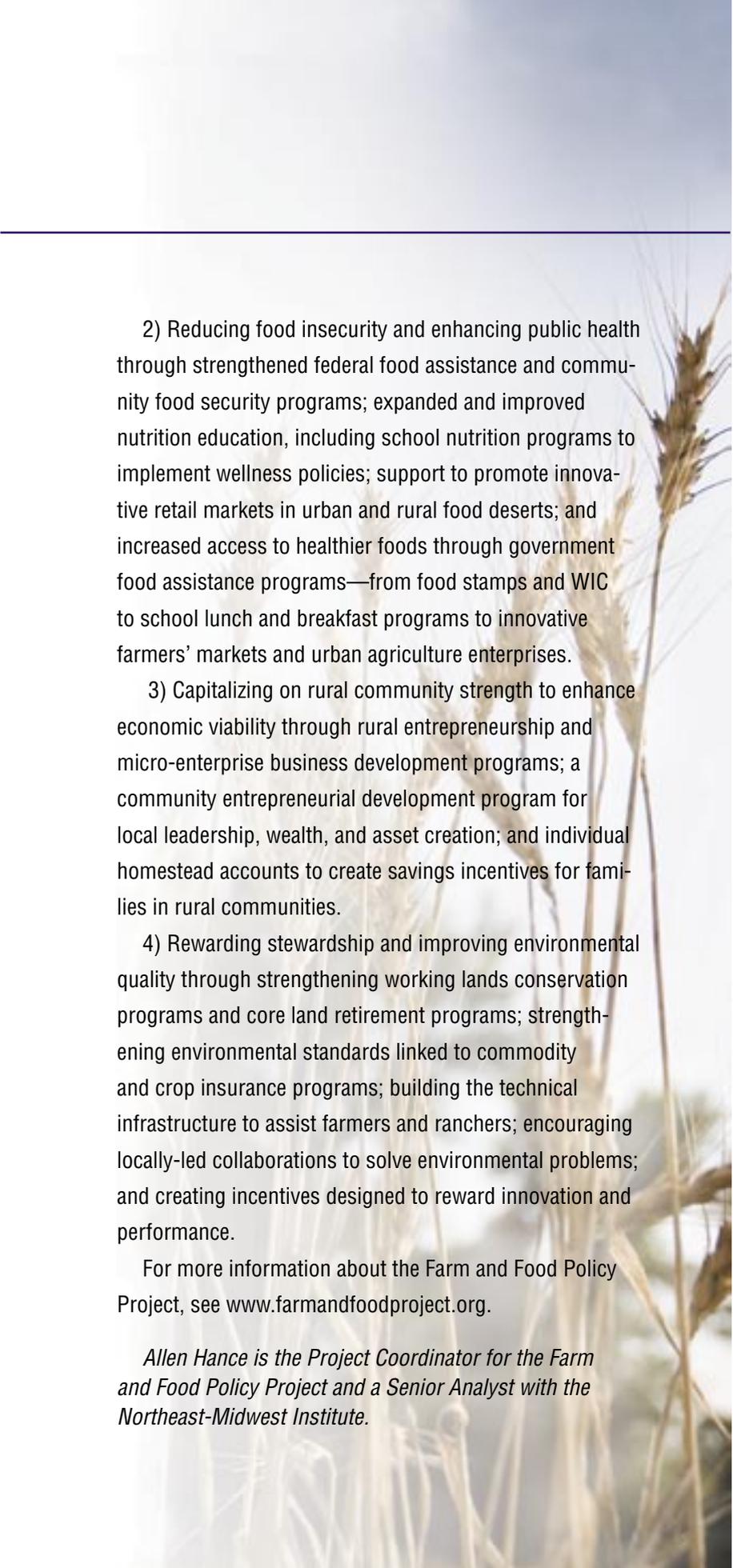
All communities deserve access to healthy food, including support to grow it themselves through grants for community-supported agriculture.

Todd Post

The FFPP believes that all the major sections of the farm bill—commodity, nutrition, rural development, credit, conservation, research, and energy—hold significant opportunities for crafting more cost-effective and higher-impact policies that can increase farm profitability and improve the health of individuals, communities, and the environment.

Coalition participants have identified core priorities and opportunities for innovation in four areas:

- 1) Advancing a new generation in farming and fostering market-based solutions through a comprehensive new and beginning farmer program; increased outreach and assistance to minority and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers; business planning and transition assistance; grants and loans for value-added (including bio-energy) enterprises; and marketing tools and infrastructure to support local and regional market development.



2) Reducing food insecurity and enhancing public health through strengthened federal food assistance and community food security programs; expanded and improved nutrition education, including school nutrition programs to implement wellness policies; support to promote innovative retail markets in urban and rural food deserts; and increased access to healthier foods through government food assistance programs—from food stamps and WIC to school lunch and breakfast programs to innovative farmers’ markets and urban agriculture enterprises.

3) Capitalizing on rural community strength to enhance economic viability through rural entrepreneurship and micro-enterprise business development programs; a community entrepreneurial development program for local leadership, wealth, and asset creation; and individual homestead accounts to create savings incentives for families in rural communities.

4) Rewarding stewardship and improving environmental quality through strengthening working lands conservation programs and core land retirement programs; strengthening environmental standards linked to commodity and crop insurance programs; building the technical infrastructure to assist farmers and ranchers; encouraging locally-led collaborations to solve environmental problems; and creating incentives designed to reward innovation and performance.

For more information about the Farm and Food Policy Project, see www.farmandfoodproject.org.

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Fourth, we need to educate the broader public about the increasingly destructive role played by current farm policy and convince people that the commodity interests can be defeated. Surveys of public opinion—including the German Marshall Fund’s annual Perspectives on Trade and Poverty Reduction²—show strong support for farmers. So we need to expose the emptiness of arguments that current farm programs function as a rural safety net, or help poor farmers, or preserve the family farm.

Fifth, consumers, the food industry, and advocates for the global poor have a strong common interest in shaping a food policy that responds to the needs of the 99 percent of Americans who are not farmers, and to the millions of people around the world who would eat more—or more nutritiously—if they were given a chance. The food industry must do its part, both as a group of powerful advocates for better public policy and as consumer-driven businesses, to help put good nutrition at the center of our farm policy and food system.

Finally, while too many people still cannot afford to buy healthy food, a lot of the people reading this article can. Until more consumers insist on environmentally-sound production methods, healthier and lower-fat products, and more ways to get locally-grown fruits and vegetables when in season, they will remain too expensive to be shared by all.

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