



Crossroads Resource Center

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Tools for Community Self-determination

What would be in your ideal farm bill in 2007?

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America is scheduled to write a new farm bill in 2007. With the World Trade Organization ruling that our farm subsidies need to be stopped because they distort trade, with public expenses for flood relief and the war effort taxing the treasury, this could be a time of interesting shifts in how we view farm policy.

Moreover, both farmer and consumer groups now state that subsidies are harming Americans and developing nations (see Tom Philpott's fine story "I'm Hatin' It," that was part of *Grist* magazine's Poverty and the Environment series, at <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2006/02/22/phipott/>).

On the other hand, there are also signs that the same coalition of grain traders and producer groups that has long supported subsidies will simply persuade Congress to extend the provisions of the existing farm bill for a few more years.

This gets me thinking about what a proper farm bill should do.

The first thing I would say is that we don't need a farm bill in 2007. Rather, we need a *food* bill, or a *rural development* bill. We need to invest in *communities*, rather than supporting *commodities*.

We support farmers in the U.S. because we want to ensure access to healthy food. But the vast majority of the \$250 billion of farm commodities that farmers sell in this country each year, are, simply put — commodities. They are actually *raw materials for industry* more than foods. Fresh food items are a small proportion of what is sold by growers. In fact, only one-half of one percent of U.S. food trade involves direct sales by farmers to consumers, as the Agriculture Census shows (http://www.nass.usda.gov/Census_of_Agriculture/index.asp). Most commodities are sold to processors who trade for a higher price, add value by creating a food product, or feed animals raised on industrial lots. Much of our corn is converted into corn sweeteners; most soybeans end up as animal food. There is no reason our federal dollars should subsidize cheap commodities for industrial production.

Moreover, on the eating end, things are spinning out of balance. Two of every three Americans is overweight. The medical costs of obesity now amount to \$118 billion per year. Half of all public school students can't afford to pay full rates for school lunch. Ten percent of all households will

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face food shortages this year. America loses 5,000 citizens a year to food poisoning. As I mentioned in a recent post, the US is about to become a net food importer (<http://gristmill.grist.org/story/2006/2/9/211544/4045>).

If our farm bill is intended to assure reliable supplies of food, and healthy eating, it has failed miserably.

The food bill of 2007 that I would write would (1) use federal dollars to invest in infrastructure that make community-based food networks more effective; (2) connect urban consumers with specific rural regions so local citizens groups could more effectively set local food policies; (3) build capacities in rural communities, including laying a foundation for community economic development, and (4) invest in ecosystem protection, in addition to (5) creating specific policies that support healthier farm practices.

My research over the past 20 years suggests that federal dollars should be used to make specific and lasting *investments* in rural and urban communities -- not to create a *cash flow* for farmers (or anyone except perhaps limited-means people). Certainly there is no justification for farm policies that primarily benefit the wealthy. No one person or family should be able to obtain more than \$30,000 in subsidies in any year.

The government also has a role to play in assuring equality of opportunity, and for monitoring to be sure that no region or group of stakeholders chronically fares better in the food and resource economy than any other.

Farmers make up less than two percent of the American population. Another reason to write a food bill is that to do so would allow urban people to help shape food policy in ways they will never be able to accomplish in a farm bill.

I'd welcome additional recommendations from others, along with a discussion of the ideas I put forth here. There are many more issues to cover, which I will address in future posts.