

## Food Fight: The Citizen's Guide to the **Next** Food and Farm Bill

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### Part1: Why the Farm Bill Matters

We Reap What We Sow  
By Daniel Imhoff

Governments have long played a role in food systems. Thousands of years ago, palace granaries' stockpiles were distributed in times of need. Such policies may have been more a matter of self-preservation than altruism; passing out free bread, rice, or other staples goes a long way toward pre-empting rebellion.

Today, most countries accept that governments need to be involved in food production and hunger prevention. Just as a strong defense is regarded as national security, a diverse and well-developed agriculture is regarded as food security. In the United States, the Department of Agriculture is charged with this dual mission: support the creation of an abundant food supply, and ensure that all citizens receive basic nutrition. One of the primary mechanisms for this is legislation passed every five years known as the Farm Bill. Unlike during the Great Depression, when the Farm Bill was first written, America is no longer a country interlaced with vibrant rural family farming communities. Today America is the world's leading industrial agriculture powerhouse. The U.S. Census identifies over two million farms, but 90 percent of the nation's farm output comes from only 300,000 mostly large-scale, highly mechanized operations. Feeding their 310 million countrymen is just one part of the job assignment. The American farmer is also expected to counter the mounting trade deficit and feed the rest of the world (or so we are told) with a steady stream of exports. Now there's the additional task of supplying crops for thirsty gas tanks, single-use packaging, and other products as a replacement for fossil fuels.

To promote this massive farm output, the government has embedded complex subsidies in various sections of the 700-page Farm Bill. Land payments, crop insurance, research assistance, export marketing, and many other programs serve to maintain an ample supply of certain foods and commodity crops. The scale of government intervention is such that talk of "free markets" is merely rhetorical. Conventional farmers stay afloat by farming the system, rather than growing what might best serve their particular tract of land or provide for more well-rounded healthy diets. If the government removes all financial risks from growing corn, offers generous tax breaks to ethanol producers and writes 6-figure checks to feedlot operators, for example, then farmers will plant corn and lots of it—even when the real winners are the agribusinesses and food manufacturers that buy it.

This plays out each spring, during what's called "the fight for dirt," when American farmers decide how much land to devote to each commodity crop. Corn wins easily, and is grown on upwards of 90 million acres of farmland, an area roughly the size of the entire state of Montana.

Then, because American farmers export 60 percent of the world's corn and 40 percent of the soybeans, these choices send ripple effects across global commodity markets. Farmers

the soybeans, these choices send ripple effects across global commodity markets. Farmers who grow corn, cotton, wheat, rice, or soybeans in countries without strong subsidy programs can be severely disadvantaged. According to Tufts University agricultural researcher Timothy Wise, the dumping of subsidized U.S. corn on the Mexican market, for instance, has cost that country's farmers as much as \$200 per acre per year since the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. An estimated 2.3 million small farmers in Mexico have been forced to look for other work in the burgeoning maquiladoras — manufacturing factories and sweatshops of U.S. corporations in cities like Juarez and Matamoros — or in fields, orchards, vineyards, and slaughter plants across the border to the north.

Massive farm worker migration is just one of the social costs of what happens when a government subsidizes an oversupply of corn. Others are harder to measure. For instance, most corn grown by American farmers isn't eaten by people. Instead, it is fed to animals in livestock warehouses and feedlots. It is fermented into ethanol (with the residual grains fed to animals), or turned into sweeteners and hundreds of other manufactured food ingredients. It contributes to a food system that relies heavily on farm chemicals, processing, packaging, and fossil fuels. The irony is that all this work conflicts with the government's other major task in overseeing the food system—establishing healthy dietary guidelines and doling out nutrition assistance to those who are hungry. It might seem that subsidizing an industrial food system would make food cheap and abundant for everyone. The reality, however, is that enrollment in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (formerly called Food Stamps) is at an all-time high. More than 44 million people in 2009 were recognized as living in “food insecure” households—the USDA's latest term for going hungry.

What's more, all the mountains of cheap food haven't made us healthy, either. Indeed, our epidemic of obesity hits the poor hardest. Fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains—the foods most recommended by USDA dietary guidelines—are largely ignored by Farm Bill policies. We have become overeaters of the wrong things, and many critics say that Farm Bill policies are at least partially at fault, and can play a dynamic role in reversing this crisis. Today's global headlines reflect riots due to rising food costs, conflicts over growing crops for fuel rather than food, and disease outbreaks emanating from ever-larger meat-, milk-, and egg-producing animal factories. The number of people affected by and worried about these problems is growing—and, increasingly, they realize that the path to reform ultimately leads to government policy. As the adage says, we reap what we sow, and in that regard there may be nothing more important than the Farm Bill.

On Store Page:

Published September, 2011

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Designed by Roberto Carra

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Introduction by Fred Kirschenmann

A Watershed Media book

ISBN-9780970950079