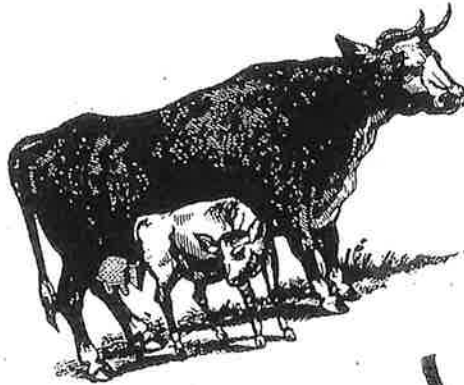


Farm Bill 101

**The Good, the Bad
& the Missing...**



**A Popular Education/Action 'Zine
From Family Farm Defenders!**

The Farm Bill – which should really be called the Food Bill since it affects way more eaters than farmers – is one of the most important yet least understood pieces of federal legislation that Congress tackles every five years.

The U.S. has had all sorts of government agriculture programs since 1776, but the current Farm Bill was born in 1933 in the midst of the Great Depression as the first major plank of FDR's New Deal – the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). The main goal of the AAA was to ensure farmers received fair value – aka parity – for their products through supply management, price controls, and other taxpayer support. Given that Jim Crow was alive and well, racism was baked into the Farm Bill from its very start, with black farmers largely excluded from receiving any sort of this federal help. Systemic discrimination was faced by others who did not fit the “white guy” farmer stereotype – and this legacy persists across U.S. farm policy.

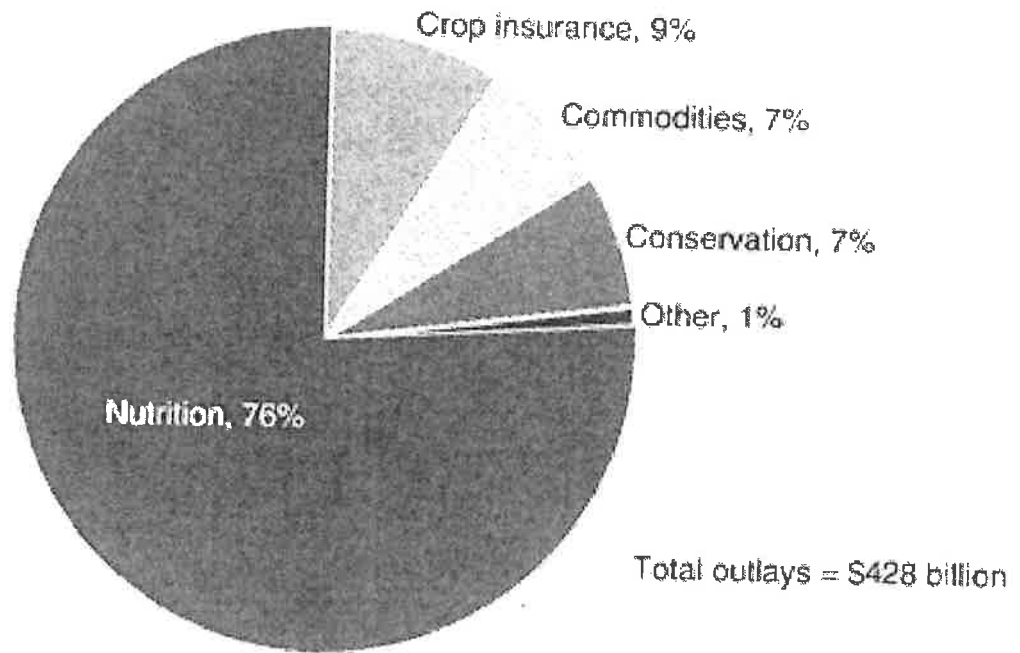


Today's Farm Bill has almost nothing to do with parity price or supply management anymore. It does still determine which types of farmers and commodities qualify for risk management programs – like crop insurance. It also provides incentives for farmland conservation, bankrolls efforts to combat chronic hunger/malnutrition, as well as supporting agricultural research and rural development projects.

Here is a graphic with the current Farm Bill spending breakdown – notice how the “food” portion is over 75% of the total budget:

Projected outlays under the 2018 Farm Act, 2019-2023

Sources: USDA, Economic Research Service calculations based on Congressional Budget Office estimates.

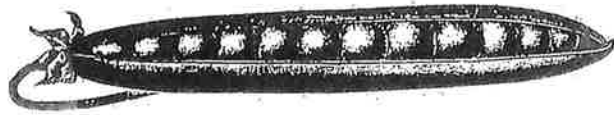


Since WWII there have been several disturbing trends in U.S. agriculture, all of which have been made worse by the Farm Bill. These include the decline of the small family farm and the “get big or get out” expansion of factory farm operations. With abandonment of parity pricing, supply management and anti-trust enforcement, corporate agribusiness has been allowed to take control of the U.S. food/farm system – to the detriment of farmers, farm/food workers, and consumers alike. Global commodity trade that benefits these same powerful multinationals has also undermined U.S. food sovereignty and threatens grassroots efforts to relocalize food/farm economies.

Farm Bill 101 – the Good, the Bad, and the Missing

Family Farm Defenders was founded by struggling dairy farmers in the 1990s and has since grown to over 3,000 members all across the country – family farmers of all sorts, as well as others who care about restoring economic justice to our entire food/farm system. There are lots of aspects to the 2023 Farm Bill debate that FFD is working on with our many allies. But a shorter explanation breaks down into three broad categories: the good, the bad, and the missing:

The Good:



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Federal anti-hunger programs also began during the New Deal, but Food Stamps didn't become a key part of the Farm Bill until Pres. Johnson in the late 1960s. Now known as SNAP, this effort has grown to become the largest single program in the Farm Bill. Over 40 million people, mostly families with children, the elderly and the disabled, now rely on SNAP. Yet, this successful program is constantly under attack when it really needs to be expanded to provide more direct access to local fresh foods – such as fruits and vegetables - provided by small farmers themselves (and not just promoting more dependence upon processed corporate junkfood). SNAP should be available to all U.S. citizens - including those in U.S. territories like Puerto Rico, as well as those who were formerly incarcerated - and it could also better support tribes with more culturally appropriate foods.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) – This is another positive cornerstone of the Farm Bill that has its roots in New Deal programs to counter the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl. Established under Pres. Reagan in 1985, CRP has become one of the most popular programs among farmers, but remains woefully underfunded. While the number of CRP acres peaked in 2008 at 37 million acres, it has now declined to just over 20 million. This is mostly because Congress through the Farm Bill has been setting lower caps for total CRP acreage and not increasing rental rates to even cover the cost of inflation. If one wants to give farmers direct support for climate friendly agroecological practices, this is the best proven way to do so – not through corporate controlled carbon credit trading schemes.

The Bad:



Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – this large pot of conservation money in the Farm Bill has now been largely hijacked by agribusiness in order to provide taxpayer subsidies for factory farms. Over 50% of EQIP is mandated for livestock operations (factory farms became eligible for this funding in 2002) which means the lion's share goes towards manure lagoons and biogas digesters – neither of which small-scale rotational livestock grazing operations would ever need. Other EQIP money goes towards drainage systems for monoculture soybean/corn operations that just aggravates topsoil runoff and water pollution. This program needs a serious overhaul, with at least a flat cap on the taxpayer handouts that a factory farm can receive. Perhaps EQIP should earmark 50% of its funding to support animals grazing outside on perennial pasture instead?

Climate “Smart” (Dumb) Agriculture. Federal crop insurance has been largely privatized since the 1980s, meaning that for every \$1 now spent by taxpayers on this version of farm support less than 60 cents reaches the actual farmer - the rest being siphoned off by the already bloated finance sector. Sadly, this bad model would be entrenched further with the “climate smart” program championed by USDA Sec. Vilsack in the 2023 Farm Bill. Under this scheme, billions will be earmarked through the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) to encourage farmers to adopt “climate smart” practices and gain carbon offset credits, but no farmer will be able to sign up for this program on their own! It will all be run through corporate intermediaries who will take their cut (25% minimum) right off the top. Talk about wasteful government spending! The direct payments under CRP are a much better way to cool our planet and reward farmers who adopt climate friendly agroecology.



The Missing:

Country of Origin Labeling (COOL)! Consumers in the U.S. have the right to know where their clothes and electronics come from, why not their food? COOL was passed under the 2002 Farm Bill for meat, seafood, and some other food items – but was not actually implemented until 2008. Then under pressure from the World Trade Organization (WTO), in 2015 Obama and Congress abandoned COOL for food altogether. Many farmer and consumer groups are demanding the return of COOL for meat, as well as dairy, seafood, and other produce. Surveys have shown that over 80% of the U.S. public supports such, and dozens of other countries already mandate COOL. This basic right to know about the origin of our food should be back in the 2023 Farm Bill!

Parity Pricing and Anti-Trust: Family farmers deserve cost of production for their hard work, just like workers deserve a living wage. But since the federal government abandoned parity as a Farm Bill policy in the 1980s, farmers have been left to the mercy of corporate food oligopolies. No farmer wants to get taxpayers handouts - they would prefer a fair price from the market place! But in order to make that happen, the USDA and Dept. of Justice (along with State Attorney Generals) need to respect and enforce anti-trust laws against the food giants. Back in 2010 the Obama Administration hosted a whole series of anti-trust hearings across the U.S. – including one on milk price fixing that drew hundreds of dairy farmers to Madison. Sadly, nothing came out of all that hype. The 2023 Farm Bill should return to its roots and once again guarantee farmers a parity price and take anti-trust seriously.

Some legislation that is now in Congress that deserves broader Farm Bill support includes:

Closing the Meal Gap Act (H.R. 4077, S. 2192) – this bill would expand SNAP to include folks in Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories (don't they deserve good food, too?) There are many other bills out there to expand SNAP – visit: <https://frac.org/action/snap-farm-bill>

Farm System Reform Act (H.R. 4421, S. 2332) - Sen. Booker (D-NJ) and Rep. Khanna (D-CA) introduced this sweeping bill that includes a moratorium on taxpayer subsidies for factory farms, strengthens the 1921 Packers and Stockyards Act, provides a transition fund for contract livestock growers to get out from under exploitative livestock contracts, as well as reinstates mandatory Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) for meat.

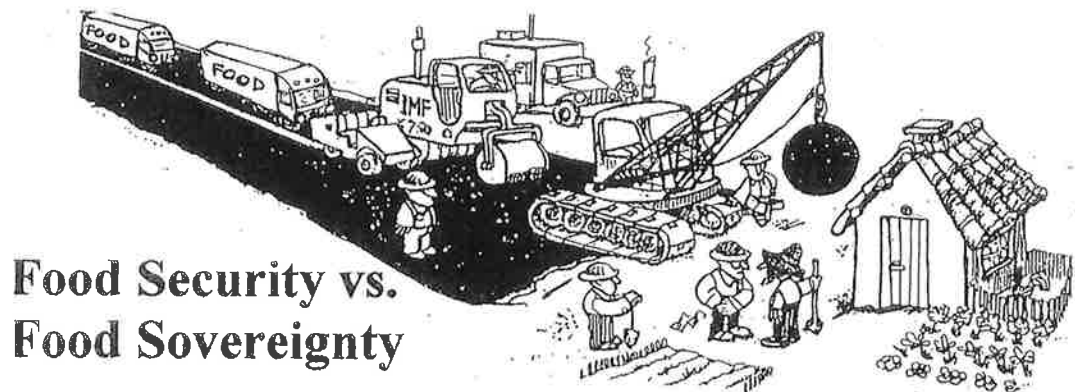
Food and Agribusiness Merger Moratorium and Anti-Trust Review Act (H.R. 7827, S.) Sen. Booker (D-NJ) and Rep. Pocan (D-WI) introduced this bill last year to block further consolidation. Without effective anti-trust enforcement, farmers and consumers will continue to endure relentless price gouging at the hands of corporate oligopolies.

Justice for Black Farmers Act (H.R. 1393, S. 300) - Sen. Booker (D-NJ) and Rep. Adams (D – NC) among many others have been pushing this legislation as part of a broader just transition agenda within the U.S. food/farm system. We need to have more diverse beginning farmers on the land – and this bill makes that possible! For more info, visit: <https://www.blackfoodjustice.org/>

Local Food and Regional Market Supply (FARMS) Act – Sen Brown (D-OH) and Rep. Pingree (D-ME) are likely to reintroduce this bill which would expand funding for value added producer grants and promotion programs for local food and farmers markets. Food should not be traveling thousands of miles if we want to promote healthier fresh food and keeping smaller farmers on the land.



There are many other good ideas that could be included in the Farm Bill – such as the right to repair one’s own tractor and defend one’s privacy from Big Ag Data pirates, limiting corporate land grabbing (with domestic speculators - like the pension giant TIAA - being the worst offenders), helping a new generation of farmers (including many immigrants and refugees) acquire their own land as private individuals or through cooperatives and landtrusts, as well as providing more assistance to socially disadvantaged farmers and other marginalized communities engaged in agri-culture (not just agribusiness). And let’s not forget the urgent need for broadband internet access, as well as universal public healthcare for ALL including those in the food/farm sector!



For more info on efforts to bring racial justice, parity and equity, agroecology and food sovereignty into the Farm Bill, visit:

Coming Clean Coalition: <https://comingcleaninc.org/>

Disparity to Parity Project: <https://disparitytoparity.org/>

Food and Water Watch: <https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org>

Friends of the Earth: <https://foe.org/>

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy: <https://www.iatp.org/>

National Family Farm Coalition: <https://nffc.net/>

Native Farm Bill Coalition: <https://www.nativefarmbill.com/coalition>

Rural Coalition: <https://www.ruralco.org/>

Southern Federation of Cooperatives: <https://www.federation.coop/>

We need more farmers, consumers, citizens, and taxpayers who care about a sustainable just transition in our food/farm system to make their voices heard in the 2023 Farm Bill debate. This is YOUR issue!



Ending the injustices that cause hunger.

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