



Community OP/ED

By Mary Theis

Fat should be trimmed from the Farm Bill

With the growing Federal deficit, Congress is trying to cut spending wherever they can. The 2012 Farm Bill is not immune to the chopping block. Proponents of farm subsidies say that these programs are to protect farmers from low prices over a long period of time. Opponents argue that the subsidies should be distributed across a wider sector of farming and not just commodity crops. How much this bill will be reduced and how the remaining money is spread out to the various recipients could impact the price of food and aid to families in need. Cutting the unnecessary fat from the Farm Bill and redistributing the subsidies so that more food crops are supported will allow healthier food, fruits and vegetables, to be more affordable for more families.

The mythical portrait of the American farmer has been one of a

single cash-strapped struggling family on the edge of financial disaster. This strong image continues to pervade most Americans' minds. However, in recent years the profile of the average farmer is actually much different. For instance, according to the advocacy group, Environmental Working Group, in 2010 the average household income for farmers was \$87,780 and for families on large farms it was \$201,465. The average farmer income was much higher than the median American household at \$49,445 (U.S. Census Bureau). This same advocacy group found that the "top 10 percent of the direct-payments recipients in 2010 received 59 percent of the money from this program." This means that the majority of farm subsidies go to large agribusinesses instead of struggling family farms. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported the 2010 net farm income was up 31% from the

previous year and that farmer debt was at the lowest rate in years at 12%. Based on these statistics the typical farmer is doing much better than the average American during these tough economic times. Do these farmers really need the "safety net" that the Farm Bill has provided for them all these years?

Of the various crops that are grown in America only a handful receive subsidies – commodity crops, such as wheat, corn, cotton, rice, oilseeds, feed grains, peanuts, sugar and dairy. I was surprised to learn that crops like fruits, nuts and vegetables are categorized with organic crops as "specialty foods." In my local grocery store the fresh produce section is proportionally larger than the bakery or rice section. Commodity crops make up 15 percent of the Farm Bill expenditures where the specialty

crops make up less than 0.5 percent. And that scant 0.5 percent for the Title X, Horticulture and Organic Agriculture portion of the Farm Bill is divided up into many programs: research, marketing, organic certification, farmer-to-consumer programs, pest control and horticulture crops.

Originally, the direct payments program in the 1996 Farm Bill was meant as a temporary measure to transition farmers off existing subsidies that were based on low prices, but in 2002 they were made permanent. Direct payments are doled out every year at a set rate regardless of income of the farm or losses incurred. This subsidy program encourages farmers to continue growing crops that there may not be enough demand for because they receive the same rate each year. If the direct payments are to remain in the Farm Bill, they should be given to those farms that show the greatest need. Putting a lower cap on the income of a farm would be a start to curtailing the misuse of our tax dollars.

Some subsidies in the current Farm Bill support the use of crops for non-food purposes, like corn

for ethanol. A 2011 congressional report states that “one-third of U.S. corn production is converted into ethanol, up from 7% a decade ago.” There is also a provision to “sell excess sugar to ethanol producers.” Adding six to ten percent ethanol to our fuel tanks does little to reduce our dependency on foreign oil. In fact, the first time I put an ethanol blend in my Subaru, the check engine light went on and my gas mileage decreased by five miles per gallon, never to return since. If anything, adding ethanol has increased the number of trips I make to the gas pump. Also, this subsidy could have unintended side effects like driving up the cost of food due to competing markets for corn and sugar. The money spent on crops-to-fuel programs would be better spent on local farm-to-school programs. Encouraging schools and consumers to buy more locally would save transportation fuel.

The fight is on for what scraps are to remain in place in the Farm Bill and which interest groups retain their share. Last fall President Obama proposed trimming \$33 billion from farm programs in the 2012 Farm Bill across ten years. The

proposal included ending the direct-payments program. On the other side, the Republican bill would cut \$40 billion with more than half taken from food stamps and conservation programs. Now, it’s not right that American families in need may go hungry because their food stamps are reduced while wealthy large farmers continue to cash in on their subsidies.

I agree that the Farm Bill should be considered for budget cuts. However, the bill should be revamped to contain sound risk management that covers a broader sector of the farming community instead of set payouts for a handful of commodity crops. Having subsidy programs that help a broad range of farmers based on need as well as the country’s need for a stable food supply is the best use of our tax dollars.

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