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America needs a farm bill that works

It's time to reform agriculture, and make Americans healthier.

June 08, 2012 | By Dan Imhoff and Michael Dimock

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In 1933, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the very first farm bill, formally called the Agricultural Adjustment Act, he told the nation that "an unprecedented condition calls for the trial of new means to rescue agriculture." That legislation, passed as the country struggled to emerge from the Depression, was visionary in the way it employed agricultural policy to address significant national issues, including rural poverty and hunger.



A farm worker hoes a row in a lettuce field near Salinas. In California, fertilizer... (Los Angeles Times)

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It may not seem obvious while standing in the aisles of a modern grocery store, but the country today faces another food and farming crisis. Forty-six million people — that is, 1 out of 7 Americans — signed up for food stamps in 2012. Despite some of the highest commodity prices in history, the nation's rural regions are falling deeper into poverty. In 2010, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 17.8% of those living in rural counties fell under the poverty line. Unemployment in Fresno County, the nation's top agricultural producing county, stood at 17.4% in March of this year. Industrial agriculture has become a leading cause of soil and water pollution. In California, for example, fertilizer and manure pollution has so contaminated the Salinas and lower San Joaquin valleys that the groundwater will be undrinkable for the next 30 to 50 years.

After 80 years, the time has come to rescue agriculture from the farm bill — and to improve the health of Americans in the bargain.

Numerous food access and healthcare advocates, family farm organizations, sustainable agriculture nonprofits, celebrity chefs and even local governments (including Seattle, New York and Los Angeles) have entered the fray and are calling for reform as Congress works to draft legislation to replace the 2008

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farm bill, which expires at the end of September. But the U.S. Senate's first draft of the omnibus legislation — which will be debated over the next few weeks — falls short.

The draft legislation makes it clear that the farm bill remains in the control of powerful agribusiness interests and anti-hunger advocates whose thinking is rooted in the last century.

Throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s, the farm bill provided incentives for farmers to "get big or get out," ushering in our contemporary industrial system of food production. Resulting harm to the environment, human health and rural communities was largely ignored. Unfortunately, current farm bill proposals would continue to disproportionately favor huge operators who have blanketed the land with monocultures.

This year's farm bill will allocate somewhere in the range of \$100 billion a year, enough money to target such challenges as the obesity epidemic, water pollution, the loss of soil and biodiversity, and the need to usher in a new generation of farmers, ranchers and land stewards. But that would require at least four fundamental shifts.

Supporting food, not feed. Crop subsidies and federal insurance should be aimed at the foods humans should eat. Currently, the lion's share of subsidies goes to commodity crops used to feed livestock or to produce ethanol or overly processed foods. A shift in what is subsidized should be accompanied by changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to include incentive programs for fruit and vegetable purchases that would help Americans avoid diet-related disease. California's Department of Food and Agriculture, working with nonprofits, has proved these programs can work. Shifting federal dollars from commodities to nutritious foods could save the nation trillions of dollars in health costs in the decades ahead.

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Focusing on safeguarding the land. As with the original farm bill, government investments in agriculture should promote conservation and good stewardship. Currently, the farm law can meet only 40% of requests from California farmers and ranchers seeking cost-share dollars for projects to protect water quality, soil health and endangered species. These are investments that benefit us all. The new legislation should shift billions of dollars from subsidies and insurance discounts to conservation programs.

Adding labor to the equation. The farm bill desperately needs a labor policy. Some 6 million farmworkers do the backbreaking work of putting food on America's tables, yet there is no portion of the 1,000-page farm bill that explicitly addresses their need for protection from exploitation. Immigration policy has to be part of the discussion too, since an estimated half of the nation's agricultural workers are undocumented immigrants.

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joelwisch2 at 8:38 PM June 9, 2012

And excellent, excellent article. There are dozens of communities that are moving to undrinkable ground water, and there are many more than that already in that position. If we leave Agribusiness alone, the problem gets worse, and citizens will die.. not to mention the abused agricultural workers who are not citizens, and cannot read English, and don't have OSHA. Lets clearly say too, the Argibusiness talks to the Times and the number of illegal aliens working the fields is at one level.. and when talking to the Immigration folks, has another number. That is so clear it hurts, and the bottom line there is we cannot trust a single thing they say.

We have a huge problem with agribusiness. The only thing I would trust in that hackle rasing industry would be OSHA doing its job, running the tests, and making those figures open to the public. We won't do it. Agribusiness will allow people to die first and I don't believe we will ever get the Valley back again, to boot. It will become a very pretty green and deadly chemical pit.

splined1 at 5:35 PM June 8, 2012

There are many reasons to oppose federal crop insurance with or without subsidies. With the recent doubling of commodity prices FCI is providing profit insurance for many farmers. Many farmers have no land costs other than real estate taxes and even those with land costs, the FCI covers these costs in many cases. This is not a proper role for government. Government is effectively targeting the largest and in most cases the most profitable businesses with bullet proof income assurance. How is this dependency creating program the proper role for a government teetering on insolvency? How does this allow for the have nots in our society an equal opportunity to compete for land? Why should a select group of farmers growing certain crops be showered with investment and profit guarantees?. Why should the havenots in our society have to compete with individuals the government is financially turbocharging with multimillion dollar investment and profit insurance? When government assumes all the risks in growing a crop, farmers are relieved from any of the rightful responsibility to budget for these risks. What do you think this does to margins of profitability in a highly competitive business?

splined1 at 5:31 PM June 8, 2012

Congress needs to be prohibited from engaging in the selective agricultural investment and profit guaranteeing business. Their sorry record of targeting select farmers with highly discriminatory multimillion dollar investment/profit guaranteeing policies has destroyed countless rural communities by neutering the ability of smaller farmers to compete. To guarantee that the largest and obviously potentially most profitable business always will have a vastly superior incomes renders the smaller farmers incapable of competing in this highly competitive business. If congress is going to be involved in the safety net business all farmers are equally deserving of comparably valued safety nets.