

# FOOD

**THE CITIZEN'S GUIDE  
TO THE NEXT FOOD  
AND FARM BILL**

**Daniel Imhoff**

**Foreword By  
Michael Pollan**

# FIGHT

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NEXT FOOD AND FARM BILL

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Foreword by Michael Pollan

Introduction by Fred Kirschenmann

Contemporary Issues Series



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Fred Kirschenmann, “A Food and Farm Bill for the 21st Century.”

Laura Sayre, “Why New Zealanders Don’t Like Farm Subsidies,” in “Farming without Subsidies:  
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# Acknowledgments

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This book is dedicated to everyone working toward a world in which good tasting, healthy, and environmentally sustainable food becomes a cornerstone of our democratic society. Many people contributed to the update of this book, which emerged as a much relied upon resource in educating the public during the last Farm Bill fight. I sincerely thank Marjorie Roswell for her ongoing support of Watershed Media, as well as the Garfield Foundation and the 11th Hour Project, who have contributed so generously to our work. I express my absolute admiration for our editor, Robin Rauzi. Emmet Hopkins labored over early revisions and left his mark on the “National Security” and “Who Will Grow Our Food” chapters. Hallie Detrick comfortably wore numerous hats: editor, fact checker, proofreader and production coordinator. Jane Mackay served as our line editor for the manuscript. Elanor Starmer helped reframe the “Family Farms to Mega Farms” and “Who Gets the Money” chapters. Thanks to Becca Klein, Marlena White, Kate Clancy and Roni Neff at the Center for a Livable Future and to Joel Kimmons of the CDC for their comments on the public health chapter. Michael Bomford of Kentucky State University set us straight on the complexity of energy issues. Randy Gray, my long-time tutor about USDA conservation programs, offered insightful comments on that chapter. Thomas Forster, Gus Schumacher and Michael Dimock shared their expertise on the emerging cross sections of public health and urban and rural agricultural partnerships. Martha Noble and Ferd Hoefner at the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition frequently shared their ears and expertise, Martha drafting an update on the GIPSA rule that was later revised. Anti-CAFO activist Lynn Henning provided information about ongoing EQIP programs that continue to pay to keep industrial animal factories in business. Ben Lilliston and Jim Kleinschmit of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy advised us on trade issues. Brise Tencer and Bob Scowcroft shared their experience on the “Organic’s Fair Share” effort. I am indebted to the numerous organizations that follow these matters closely, including [farmpolicy.com](http://farmpolicy.com), Food and Water Watch, the Environmental Working Group, AGree, Dan Morgan and the German Marshall Fund, the Center for Rural Affairs, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Food Democracy Now, Roots of Change, and many others. Thanks to Chris Blum and Kris Costill for our updated cover and of course to our graphic designer, Timothy Rice, who pulled everything together. I must always thank my wife, Quincey, and the staff and Board of Directors of Watershed Media who guide the ship on our yearly journeys. My humble and sincere apologies if I forgot anyone.

—Dan Imhoff, November 2013



*I tell you frankly that this is a new and untrod path, but I tell you with equal frankness that a unprecedented condition calls for the trial of new means to rescue agriculture. If a fair administrative trial of it is made and it does not produce the hoped-for results I shall be the first to acknowledge and advise you.*

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt, March 16, 1933,  
*New Means to Rescue Agriculture*, speech to Congress

*Men who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce. Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby the fruits may be eaten. ... The works of the roots of the vines, of the trees, must be destroyed to keep up the price, and this is the saddest, bitterest thing of all. ... A million people hungry, needing the fruit- and kerosene sprayed over the golden mountains.*

*There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates—died of malnutrition—because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.*

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

*The United States government's agricultural policy, or non-policy, since 1952 has merely consented to the farmers' predicament of high costs and low prices; it has never envisioned or advocated in particular the prosperity of farmers or farmland, but has only promised "cheap food" to consumers and "survival" to the "larger and more efficient" farmers who supposedly could adapt to and endure the attrition of high costs and low prices. And after each inevitable wave of farm failures and the inevitable enlargement of the destitution and degradation of the countryside, there have been the inevitable reassurances from government propagandists and university experts that American agriculture was now more efficient and that everybody would be better off in the future.*

—Wendell Berry, *The Total Economy*, *Citizenship Papers*

# Don't Call It the "Farm Bill," Call It the "Food Bill"

Michael Pollan

Every five to seven years, the president of the United States signs an obscure piece of legislation that determines what happens on a couple hundred million acres of private property in America, what so much of food Americans eat (and how much it costs), and, as a result, the health of our population. In a nation consecrated to the idea of private property and free enterprise, you would not think any piece of legislation could have such far-reaching effects, especially one about which so few of us—even the most politically aware—know anything. But in fact, the American food system is a game played according to a precise set of rules that are written by the federal government with virtually no input from any but a handful of farm-state legislators. Nothing could do more to reform America's food system, and by doing so, improve the condition of America's environment and public health, than if the rest of us were to weigh in.

***The Farm Bill determines what our kids will eat for lunch in school every day. Right now, the school lunch program is designed not around the goal of children's health, but to help dispose of surplus agricultural commodities, especially cheap feedlot beef and dairy products, both high in fat.***

The Farm Bill helps determine what our kids will eat for lunch in school every day. Right now, the school lunch program is designed not around the goal of children's health, but to help dispose of surplus agricultural commodities, especially cheap feedlot beef and dairy products, both high in fat.

The Farm Bill writes the regulatory rules governing the production of meat in this country, determining whether the meat we eat comes from sprawling, brutal, polluting factory farms and the big four meatpackers (which control more than 80 percent of the market), or from local farms.

Most important, the Farm Bill determines what crops the government will support—and, in turn, which kinds of foods will be plentiful and cheap. Today that means, by and large, corn and soybeans. These two crops are the building blocks of the fast food nation: a McDonald's meal (and most of the processed food in your supermarket) consists of clever arrangements of corn and soybeans—the corn providing the added sugars, the soy providing the added fat, and both providing the feed for the animals. These crop subsidies (which are designed to encourage overproduction rather than to help farmers by supporting prices) are the reason that the cheapest calories in an American supermarket are precisely the unhealthiest. An American shopping for food on a budget soon discovers that a dollar buys hundreds more calories on the snack food or soda aisle than it does in the produce section. Why? Because the Farm Bill supports the growing of corn but not the growing of fresh carrots. In the midst of an epidemic of diabetes and obesity, our government is subsidizing the production of high-fructose corn syrup. In effect, we're supporting both sides in the war on type 2 diabetes.

This absurdity would not persist if more voters realized that the Farm Bill is not a parochial piece of legislation strictly concerning the interests of agribusiness farmers. Today, because so few of us realize we have a dog in this fight, our legislators feel free to leave debate over the Farm Bill to the farm states, very often trading away their votes on agricultural policy for votes on issues that matter more to their constituents. But what could matter more than the health of our children and the health

of our land?

Perhaps the problem begins with the fact that this legislation is commonly called “the Farm Bill”—how many people these days even know a farmer or care about agriculture? Yet we all have a stake in eating. So perhaps that’s where we should start, now that the debate over the 2012 Farm Bill is about to be joined. This time around let’s call it “the Food Bill” and put our legislators on notice that we’re paying attention.

**Michael Pollan is the author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, *The Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*, and, most recently, *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual*. He is a long-time contributor to the *New York Times* magazine and is the Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley.**

# A Food and Farm Bill for the 21st Century

*Fred Kirschenmann*

As the manager and co-owner, with my sister, of Kirschenmann Family Farms in North Dakota, I fully understand the challenges that farmers face in today's agricultural economy, as well as the additional challenges we will likely face in coming decades. I am also keenly aware of the impact farm policy can have on farmers. The farm policies we design now will likely determine whether we will continue to have a sustainable food system in the future.

Most farmers today, even on some of the smaller and mid-sized farms, must accumulate millions in capital to acquire land and equipment just to be able to farm. And even those who successfully get into farming find most of their cash receipts eaten up each year by the expenses they incur. Consequently, most farmers stay in business only by generating additional income through off-farm jobs and government subsidies.

***This economic dilemma farmers face may seem of little consequence to the average urban/suburban citizen. But an enlightened food and farm policy is of considerable consequence to every citizen on the planet.***

The 1996 Farm Bill, dubbed the Freedom to Farm Act, was intended to change that. By gradually reducing government commodity subsidies and allowing farmers to produce whatever they wanted, the 1996 Farm Bill backers assumed that farmers would make adjustments in response to market demand, enabling the government to get out of the subsidy game. For example, if farmers could not generate a net profit by producing corn at the available contract price, they would presumably plant different crops. Eventually the reduced supply would drive its market price up enough for those who did plant corn to make a net profit. Of course, it didn't work out that way.

Rational farmers know that when the price of corn goes down, producing less corn to drive prices up is not a real option. They know that their individual decisions to reduce corn acres in an effort to balance supply with demand will have little effect on supply or price. It will simply reduce their own income. When the price of corn drops, they will produce as much as possible as their only defense against economic disaster. Naturally, if the price of corn goes up, they will also produce as much as possible to make up for the income lost in leaner times.

The lesson here is that, as individuals, farmers cannot manage supply to coincide with demand. That can only occur through a comprehensive farm policy. Now, this economic dilemma farmers face may seem of little consequence to the average urban/suburban citizen. But an enlightened food and farm policy is of considerable consequence to every citizen on the planet.

It is in everyone's best interest to have:

- **Stable societies.** We cannot have stable, secure societies without a food production and distribution system that supplies a safe and adequate diet to every person. Malnutrition and starvation breed terrorism and social unrest.
- **An ecologically restorative food and fiber system.** We cannot meet present and future food needs if we continue to undermine the health of the land, pollute and overuse our water, and

destroy our biological and genetic diversity.

- 
- **An economically and ecologically efficient food and fiber system.** True efficiency must address the use of energy, capital, soil and water, and community, as well as labor. Our policies must move us toward a system based on renewable energy, recycled wastes, and diverse farming systems and ecosystems.
  - **A food and fiber system that encourages independent entrepreneurship.** Human capital is critical to a sustainable food system. Without an influx of young, entrepreneurial, creative, dedicated, wise, and imaginative farmers, we will have trouble facing the challenges ahead.
  - **Regional food sufficiency and food sovereignty.** We need food and farming systems that share our limited planetary resources so that citizens in every region of the planet can become food self-reliant.

The era of industrial agriculture, which relied on abundant natural resources to fuel our production systems and adequate natural “sinks” to absorb its wastes, is rapidly coming to a close. Even business design specialists now recognize this. We have so overexploited most of the earth’s natural resources and so polluted the natural environment that continuing on our present industrial agriculture course is simply no longer viable.

Even oil industry leaders acknowledge that the days of “easy oil” have passed. And since our industrial food system depends almost entirely on fossil fuels, we must make major course corrections. We currently produce most of our nitrogen (fertilizer) from natural gas and most of our pesticides from petroleum; our farm equipment is largely produced with petroleum resources. And, of course, petroleum fuels all of our farm equipment.

Industrial agriculture has also depleted our fresh water resources. According to Lester Brown of the WorldWatch Institute, agricultural irrigation uses 70 percent of those resources. Four-fifths of China’s grain production depends on irrigation, as do three-fifths of India’s grain production and one-fifth of U.S. agriculture. And ground water resources are rapidly declining—ten feet per year in China and twenty feet per year in India.

Climate change will continue to bring us more floods, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, hail storms, frost, and heat waves, making it extremely difficult to maintain today’s highly specialized monoculture cropping systems, which require relatively stable climates.

These and other imminent challenges will force agriculture to transition from an industrial economy to an ecologically based economy. We must invent a new era of agriculture. Anthropologist Ernest Schusky has reminded us, humans have made three major transitions in the way we secure our food. First we employed hunting and gathering techniques. Then we invented agriculture and produced our food by domesticating plants and animals, using human and animal energy inputs to drive the system—the Neolithic era that lasted almost 10,000 years. In the 1930s we introduced a third era, which Schusky calls the “neocaloric era” because it depends almost entirely on imported caloric inputs—fertilizer, pesticides, antibiotics, growth hormones, feed additives, diesel fuel, and so on. We continue to use these “old calories”—that is, calories that nature has stored for billions of years—at a rapid rate, and since they are “old calories” they are not renewable. Consequently we must very soon invent the “next era” of agriculture.

This shift will require innovative planning and policy making. Can we create a new agricultural system that increases the availability of healthy, nutritious food in all regions of the planet yet uses only

fourth of the external energy inputs, requires less than half the water, and thrives in adverse climate conditions?

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Pulitzer Prize winner Jared Diamond vividly reminds us that those civilizations that have correctly assessed their current situations, anticipated the coming challenges, and gotten a head start preparing for them, were the ones that survived. Those that failed in that exercise, collapsed. Shaping public food and farm policies now that begin to address these issues will help prepare us for the day when we can no longer ignore them. The critique that Dan Imhoff provides on our current farm policies in the following pages, and his invitation for all citizens to become engaged in the food and farm policy debate, can begin to take us down this new path.

**Fred Kirschenmann is a Distinguished Fellow at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and president of Kirschenmann Family Farms, a 3500-acre certified organic farm in Windsor, North Dakota. He is past president of Farm Verified Organic and has served on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Standards Board.**



## Food Democracy

Delving into the Farm Bill can seem like visiting another country (if not another planet), with its foreign language and sometimes twisted logic. *Specialty crops*, for example, are what the USDA calls fruits, vegetables, and nuts—the foods that we are told to eat five to nine servings of each day. *ChIMPS* describes what happens when budget committees make a “change in mandatory program spending,” taking away the funds that were promised for a program, such as permanently protecting wetlands or providing supplemental nutrition to low-income families. “Direct payments” are the redistribution of tax dollars to landowners, based on the historical harvest records of a property, regardless of whether the land is still being farmed or the owner has suffered income or yield losses. For the average citizen concerned about the food system, rural job creation, and stewardship of the land, it’s a trip that’s more frustrating than inspiring.

I confess, I am a reluctant policy wonk. But these are the issues of our times. If Americans don’t weigh in on the Farm Bill, the agribusiness lobbyists will be more than happy to draft the next one for us as they have done for at least 30 years.

The Farm Bill that passed into law in May 2008 certainly did not give those who care about local grown food and revitalized regional food systems or protected natural habitats within farming regions much to cheer about. The bill, like its predecessors, primarily insured that very big growers of a select few crops make—or at least don’t lose—money. But the real winners are the commodity cartels: concentrated animal feeding operations, and gasohol producers that purchase corn, cotton, soybeans, wheat, and rice in buyers’ markets. If there was a sea change in ‘08, it was a troubling one. Over 70 cents of every dollar allocated by the Farm Bill now goes to Food Stamps, known as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). In dire economic times, approximately 45 million Americans have come to depend on hunger assistance—almost three times the number of just a decade ago. If nothing else, this shocking shift exposes the shortcomings of our national food system, which, in theory, has prioritized making food cheap and plentiful.

The good news? There were incremental improvements, such as programs to enable low-income consumers to shop at farmers markets, help beginning farmers and ranchers, expand the research base of organic farming, and set up new businesses that add value to food by making things like cheese and yogurt or packaged cherries or carrots for school snacks. More money was allocated for conservation programs than at any time in recent history. (However, \$500 million was ChIMPed from conservation programs by budget reconcilers in 2011 and \$1 billion was stripped in 2012, an all too familiar occurrence.)

To me, the most encouraging development was that more Americans than ever tuned into the Farm Bill debate. Erstwhile House Speaker Nancy Pelosi admitted, “The Farm Bill used to be my least informed vote. Now I know more about it than I ever wanted to know. It’s fascinating.”

This book was intended to be a primer, a view of the Farm Bill from 30,000 feet. The goal was to increase political literacy on the subject, to translate the jargon, to tell people how to engage strategically with the webs of producers that actually put food on their tables. As this second edition goes out, there is a groundswell of Americans who already vote with their forks and food dollars. When they also learn to dig in politically, the food fight will begin to be a fair fight.

The Farm Bill is a tremendous opportunity: used correctly, it can incentivize an agriculture and food system that remedies rather than perpetuates many of today's problems. Absent any significant campaign finance reform, I can't help wondering what it would be like if eaters had their own political action committee or lobbying organization. An EAT Healthy PAC or a Food and Farm Patriot lobbying organization that could press for programs that truly are investments in family farmer conservation, jobs and affordable, nutritious food for all Americans. What an engine for healthy people, healthy air and water, and healthy economies that might be. It would be subsidization with meaningful social obligation in return.



# Why the Farm Bill Matters

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# 1. We Reap What We Sow

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Governments have long played a role in food systems. Thousands of years ago, palace granaries and 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 preventing 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 99 percent of the nation's farm output comes from only 300,000 mostly large-scale, highly mechanized operations.<sup>1</sup> 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.

***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.***

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 mere rhetoric. 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 upward 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 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.<sup>2</sup> A

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.<sup>3</sup>


What's more, all the mountains of cheap food haven't made us healthy, either. Indeed, an 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.


Figure 1


## Effects Of Cornification





 **Taxpayer Subsidies.** Direct payments and crop insurance totaling nearly \$4 billion in 2009 help make corn the largest crop. Many small- and medium-sized farmers depend on subsidies to survive. Large operators use subsidies to get bigger.

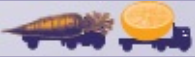
 **Corn surpluses.** 12.54 billion bushels were produced on nearly 90 million acres in 2010. Very little of the corn is actually fed to humans. Most goes to animal feed or is processed into starches, corn oil, sweeteners, or ethanol for our gas tanks.


 **Rural Exodus.** The farmer replacement rate has fallen below 50 percent as younger generations flee the Corn Belt for the “Fruitful Coasts.” There are seven times as many principal farm operators over the age of 65 as there are under 35. Many wonder if the United States may permanently lose the skills and productive farmland to remain an agricultural leader.


 **Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations.** Confinement facilities, largely made possible and profitable through the low costs of subsidized feed, house tens of thousands of hogs, chickens, or cattle. Heavy concentrations of animal wastes, odor pollution, reliance on antibiotics, and dangerous workplaces are just a few of the many concerns.

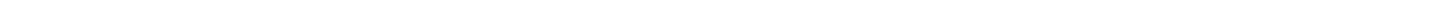
 **Food Deserts.** Monoculture specialization of corn and other grains for export is the reason we see “so much agriculture, so little food” in farming areas. Impoverished inner city areas, where access to supermarkets or farmers markets is limited or nonexistent, also become “food deserts.”

 **The Obesity Crisis.** The number of Americans who are overweight or obese climbed to 68 percent in 2008; the childhood obesity rate more than tripled between 1980 and 2008, from 5 percent to 17 percent. Lack of physical activity and poor nutrition—linked to subsidized and super-sized processed foods high in sugar, fats, and sodium along with soft drinks—lie at the root of the epidemic.

 **Food Miles.** The average fresh produce item now travels approximately 5,000 miles from farm to table. California, Florida, and a number of other states (and a growing number of countries) supply the nation’s supermarkets with fruits and vegetables. Relatively little of this “specialty crop” production is federally supported.

 **Immigration.** Since the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, an estimated 1.3 to 2.3 million Mexican campesinos were forced to leave their lands and move elsewhere (the U.S. or Mexico) to attain employment. Subsidized U.S. corn, combined with the NAFTA trade agreement, has had a catastrophic effect on Mexican farmers.

 **The Dead Zone.** Nutrient and chemical runoff from farms in the Corn Belt flow through watersheds that empty into the Mississippi River and create a “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico, harming fish and marine life. (There are dozens of agriculturally induced hypoxic zones around the world, including the Chesapeake Bay.)



## 2. Why the Farm Bill Matters

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On one level, we could make this a very short read by simply stating that the Farm Bill doesn't matter at least to the average citizen. It's a fully rigged game run by the immensely powerful farm lobbies and monopolies that profit mightily from how our food is grown, processed, marketed and distributed. No matter what we concerned citizens do to change an unfair and unhealthy system for the better, we are inevitably going to fall short. There is simply too much money at stake in a corrupt political process to make any significant difference. Sadly, this may be all too true. The next Farm Bill may well end up propping up the industrial agriculture complex with billions of annual taxpayer dollars, it has done for decades. But this issue is far too important to go down without a serious debate.

***As a result of the Farm Bill, citizens pay a national food bill at least three times: (1) at the checkout stand; (2) in taxes that subsidize commodity crop production; and (3) in environmental cleanup and medical costs.***

Here's why.

If you eat, pay taxes, care about biodiversity, worry about the quality of school lunches, or notice the loss of farmland and woodlands, you have a personal stake in the Farm Bill. If you're concerned about escalating federal budget deficits, the fate of family farmers, working conditions for immigrant farm laborers, the persistence of hunger and poverty, or how we value local and organic food, you should pay attention to the Farm Bill. There are dozens more reasons why the Farm Bill, and its attendant tens of billions of dollars, is critical to our land, our bodies, and our children's future. Some include:

- The twilight of the cheap oil age.
- The onset of unpredictable climatic conditions.
- Looming water shortages.
- Plummeting wild fish populations.
- An aging farm population and lack of young farmers.
- Expansion in production of biofuels and bioplastics.
- Escalating medical costs related to obesity.
- Direct payments to corporate farms regardless of economic need.
- 50 million Americans, at least 20 percent of them children, who don't get enough to eat.

The Farm Bill matters because it makes some big mega-farms scandalously rich as it drives family farmers out of business. It makes the ingredients of unhealthy food cheap and abundant and at the same time it produces a fragile rather than a resilient food system. It legalizes and supports polluting and destructive monoculture farming practices, then spends billions trying to put bandages on the damage. It artificially sets prices, while officials tout the virtues of "free markets" and "fair trade." Its consequences contribute to poverty, rural exodus, and famine.<sup>1</sup>

Although subsidies do provide a critical safety net in some years to family farms that continue to grow commodity crops, the big beneficiaries are absentee landlords, tractor dealers, and insurance companies that service farmers, as well as the corporate agribusinesses, grain distributors, animal feed

operations, and ethanol producers that purchase subsidized crops. What started as an ambitious temporary effort to lift millions of Americans out of economic and ecological desperation during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl (supported initially by a tax on food processors) devolved over decades into a corporate boondoggle. As a result of the Farm Bill, citizens pay a national food bill at least three times: (1) at the checkout stand, (2) in taxes that subsidize commodity crop production, and (3) in environmental cleanup and medical costs related to the consequences of industrial commodity-based agriculture.

Most analysts, most farmers, and even many legislators agree that our present course leaves the nation unprepared for the urgent challenges it faces in the 21st century.<sup>2</sup> The silver lining is that Americans actually have a substantial food and farm policy to debate. Conditions for change are ripe as market dynamics and public awareness rapidly align to create momentum against farm politics as usual.

***Our challenge is not to abolish government support; it is, rather, to make certain we are investing in a viable future for our food system.***

Indeed, the Farm Bill matters because much needed funds can drive small-scale entrepreneurship, on-farm research, species protection, nutritional assistance, healthy school lunches, job creation, and habitat restoration. Our challenge is not to abolish government support; it is, rather, to make certain we are investing in a viable future for our food system. No one knows exactly how that change will unfold. But most observers agree that massive giveaways to corporations and surplus commodity producers must yield to policies that reward stewardship, promote healthy diets, enhance regional food production, support family farms, and make it easier for hungry families to eat healthy foods.

Figure 2

## Course Correction

Americans deserve a Farm Bill that addresses the challenges of the times. Current Farm Bill programs shovel money to the largest producers and don't properly support the small- and medium-sized growers, otherwise known as the "agriculture of the middle." Our system is overloaded with animal products and manufactured foods and short on fruit and vegetable production.

With record budget deficits, rising energy costs, an unpredictable climate, and skyrocketing health costs due to preventable nutritional diseases, we can't afford not to act. Future Farm Bills must look forward to ensure that we have a farm population actively engaged in growing healthy foods, conservation incentives that protect our natural resources from contamination and overexploitation, research that gives farmers valuable tools, and nutrition programs that ensure healthy and affordable food for all.

**Present  
Challenges**

**Solutions Proposed by Farm Bill  
Reformers**



Consolidation and concentration in the hands of a few corporate agribusinesses	Limit payments to individual recipients to level the playing field for all farmers; Reform meatpacker regulations to break monopoly control of livestock industry; Protect small and mid-sized farmers
Soil and biodiversity loss	Make on-farm conservation efforts requirements of all insurance and subsidy programs; Make no net soil loss a goal of farm programs through fully enforced Sod Saver, Sod Buster, and Swamp Buster provisions.
Converging national health care crises	Better align crop supports with most recent USDA “My Plate” nutrition guidelines
Childhood obesity on the rise	Launch nationwide farm-to-school, farm-to-college, and other fresh food distribution programs that also include a strong educational and fitness component
Chronic hunger and improper nutrition that affects over 45 million Americans	Maintain food assistance programs including improved access to healthy foods; Expand funding for SNAP-Ed and SNAP at farmers markets; Ensure that every American has access to affordable, healthy food
Sprawl into prime farmland	Greater funding to keep farm and rangeland in agricultural use and open space rather than subdivisions and sprawl
Record budget deficits	Make spending serve as true public investment with targeted results; Combine funding sources
World Trade Organization rulings declaring U.S. export subsidies illegal	Shift subsidies toward green payments such as the Conservation Stewardship Program that rewards farmers for environmental caretaking rather than overproduction of export crops
Devastated farm communities	Investments and loans to revitalize and diversify rural sector; Rebuild livestock processing infrastructure
Rapidly aging U.S. farm population	Add 100,000 new farmers and ranchers over the course of the next Farm Bill
Escalating energy costs	Expand research into energy-effective farming systems and increase support for on-farm energy conservation and renewable energy infrastructure
Increasing dependence on commodity exports and imports of “fresh” food	Invest in value-added processing and flexible supports for more diversified local and regional “specialty crops”; Increase funding for efforts like the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack program



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