

## Rethinking Farm Policy: the 2012 Farm Bill

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I decided during discussions leading up to the 2008 Farm Bill that I had become too radical to be relevant to the process. I had come to the conclusion meaningful changes in farm policy would require *radical* changes in farm policy, beginning with elimination of all commodity-based programs. There is no way to have a rational farm program with so much of the U.S.D.A. budget devoted to programs in direct conflict with the legitimate public interest in agriculture. In fact, if Americans really understood what their tax dollars were being used for, they would probably demand that the Department of Agriculture be abolished. Instead, a carefully orchestrated propaganda campaign has maintained continuing strong public support for farm programs that are clearly in conflict with public interests. The only way to fix farm policy is to “kick the corporate pigs away from the trough” – corporations including special interest groups, such as Farm Bureau and commodity associations, as well as agribusinesses.

More recently, I have begun to realize that I am not the only policy radical around. Gustave Speth, founder of the World Resources Institute, co-founder of the Natural Resource Defense Council, advisor to Jimmy Carter & Bill Clinton, and author of *Red Sky in the Morning*, wrote in his *Bridge at the Edge of the Earth*, “All and all, today's environmental movement has not been succeeding. We have been waging battles, some critical ones, but losing the war.” He has concluded that environmental policy groups have been systematically depleting their resources and energy in battles over specific details of environmental policies designed to appease the taxpaying public rather than address the real issues. I see exactly the same thing in Farm Policy. The various advocacy organizations stake out positions on “pet programs” where they think they have some chance for success and focus their efforts on achieving successes they can report to their supporters. They don't tackle the real issues, because they need to record some victories.

That said, some agricultural organizations seem to be catching on. For example, Brian Snyder, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture – a major policy advocacy organization – recently wrote, “I think we may need to give up, at least for now, all Farm Bill programs aimed at supporting sustainability and concentrating instead on totally eliminating the subsidies that distort the free markets we really need for farms to be viable. To put it another way, we will never be able to redesign the federal pie as currently formulated unless we're willing to step up first and renounce our sacred piece of it.” He advocates tax credits for sustainable farmers instead of farm programs.

It's time to tell American consumers and taxpayers the truth. Farm programs of at least the last 50 years have been an absolute failure. The only legitimate justification for farm policy is domestic food security. No nation can afford to trust domestic food security to the marketplace. Markets respond to money, not to human need. The 2012 Farm Bill discussion should be a call for a consumer/taxpayer revolt against current farm policy. The historic strategy for food security in America was to keep enough farm families on the land, who were committed to taking care of the land, to produce enough food for the nation. The government would provide food security for the poor by distributing some part of what was produced to those unable to buy enough food to meet their needs.

The focus of farm policy shifted from preserving family farms to increasing productivity during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Of course the rhetoric of farm policy remained “preserving the family farm,” because that theme was politically popular, even though each new farm bill resulted in fewer farms. Every significant farm policy during my 40-year career as an agricultural economist has promoted the industrialization of agriculture with the intent of making agriculture more productive and economically efficient. We have subsidized specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control – first into larger farms and more recently under corporate control – all in the name of economic efficiency. The idea was that if we made food cheap enough everyone could buy enough good food to keep them healthy – we could eliminate hunger through the marketplace.

The American “cheap food policy” has worked. Americans, on average, are spending only half as much of their disposable income for food today as they were in the 1960s. However, a larger percentage of the American population is hungry today than in the 1960s – about 16% in total and 22% of children. In addition, Americans today are spending twice as much for health care as in the 1960s, and a large portion of these costs are diet related – including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and various types of cancer. A Robert Wood Johnson Foundation report projected that 20% of all health care costs by 2020 would be related to obesity. If we include the health problems related to contamination of food and water with pesticide residues, antibiotic resistant bacteria, growth hormones, salmonella, and E-Coli, the American diet probably accounts for closer to half of all health problems in the U.S. The RWJ report estimates if current trends continue, health care will claim more than one-third of the total economic output of the nation by 2040. We simply can't afford the *high costs of cheap food*.

We need to tell American consumers and taxpayers the truth. The industrialization of agriculture and the farm policies that have supported it are absolute failures. Current farm programs are not just a blatant waste of tax dollars; they are destroying the physical and economic health of the nation. Too many people are still hungry; too people who can afford to eat are getting sick. Instead of providing domestic food security they have become welfare programs for wealthy landowners and corporate investors. The biofuels programs are a total perversion of any logical approach to farm policy – starving people around the world to fuel our automobiles. The 2012 farm bill should be a single-page piece of legislation that eliminates the budget for all existing farm programs by 2015, abolishes the original farm legislation, and mandates that farm policies be radically redesigned to ensure domestic food security.

I have suggested shifting food related programs from the Department of Agriculture to a new Department of Domestic Food Security. The biofuels programs should be shifted to the Department of Energy. All regulatory authority over agricultural chemicals and livestock wastes should be shifted to the Environmental Protection Agency. Farm programs should be shifted to the IRS in the form of tax credits for farmers who are willing to transition from industrial to sustainable agriculture. Only individual farmers should be eligible, not landowners or investors, and the credits should be phased out entirely as individual farm incomes rise to average income levels for U.S. taxpayer. This would leave the U.S.D.A free to promote agriculture exports and other corporate agribusiness interests, as it does today, without compromising its responsibilities to the public. Regardless, it's time to rethink farm policy from the ground up and to start over from scratch. If that's too radical to even be considered, then I will just have to remain irrelevant.