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For the Farm Lobby, Too Much Is Never Enough

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By Steven Pearlstein
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With the possible exception of the ski industry, it's hard to think of any sector of the economy that will be hit harder by global warming than agriculture. A report out last week from scientists at 13 government agencies found that climate change is happening more quickly than we thought and that by the end of the century, many farmers will face scorching summer weather, severe storms, prolonged drought and swarms of new insects.

Given those prospects, you might expect the farm lobby to be in the vanguard of those pushing for enactment of legislation to cap the amount of greenhouse gases that are emitted into the atmosphere. But that wouldn't be Elmer, would it? True to form, he has demanded another boost in his already lavish government subsidies before he'll even consider doing something about global warming.

Let's review the bidding.

The climate-change bill that is scheduled for a vote in the House today would over the next decade reduce by 17 percent the amount of greenhouse gases that businesses and individuals would be allowed to release. Those who generate most of those gases would gradually be forced to buy pollution permits, either from the government or from someone else who has extra allocations and is willing to sell them on the open market. By imposing what amounts to a tax on carbon emissions, the bill envisions, businesses and households will respond by reducing their energy consumption or switching to cleaner renewable sources of energy.

Because they are the source of most carbon emissions, factories, power plants and oil refineries would all be covered by the caps and be required to buy the permits, or allowances, as they are called. The one major source that is not covered is the American farm. From the start, everyone agreed that it would be an administrative nightmare to try to measure and regulate the amount of carbon produced on each farm. Given the power of the farm lobby, everyone agreed that it was also a political non-starter.

But, for farmers, it wasn't enough to get a free pass on carbon emissions. They are unhappy that the effect of the caps and pollution permits will be to raise the price of their fuel, fertilizer and electricity. No matter that other Americans will suffer similar effects. In the mind of the entitled American farmer, any increase in costs or reduction in revenue -- whether from natural causes, market forces or government regulation -- must be compensated for by the government.

So farmers demanded that they be allowed to earn some extra cash by reducing the carbon footprint on their farms and selling these "offsets" to the factories and power plants unlucky enough to be subject to the carbon-cap regime. They want to be paid extra if they change the feedstock to cut down

on cow burps and farts. Or if they use the no-till method for planting seeds, which doesn't release the carbon trapped in the soil. Or if they put in devices to trap the methane released from animal poop.

And they demanded to be paid not just if they do these things in the future, but also if they did them last year or the year before. They demanded the payments even if they are already getting a check from the government to do the same things as part of some other conservation program. And perhaps most notably, they demanded that the job of supervising this offset program be shifted from the Environmental Protection Agency, whose focus would actually be ensuring that the reductions are real, to the Department of Agriculture, which sees its mission as preserving, protecting and defending American farm subsidies.

Elmer's support for the climate-change bill, however, could not be had for merely a few billion dollars a year in offsets. There was also an ethanol boondoggle to protect.

It seems those pesky scientists over at the EPA had done a preliminary analysis showing that if you considered the indirect effects of producing a lot of additional corn-based ethanol -- like the need to make up for the lost food production somewhere else -- then ethanol might not qualify as a carbon-reducing "renewable fuel" under the 2007 energy bill, potentially jeopardizing ethanol's guaranteed market of 15 billion gallons a year. To rectify this gross injustice, Elmer demanded -- and won -- a five-year moratorium on any final determination while a study is conducted on how the EPA was conducting its study.

All of these concessions were hammered out last weekend among Collin Peterson, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, and fellow Democrats Henry Waxman and Ed Markey, the chief sponsors of the climate-change bill. The House leadership and the White House acquiesced; the press conference was duly held. And what was the result?

Bob Stallman, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation and the self-proclaimed "voice of agriculture," yesterday urged all House members to vote against the climate-change bill, claiming it would "result in a net economic cost to farmers with little or no environmental benefit."

The next time the world's most selfish lobby comes to Washington demanding drought relief, someone ought to have the good sense to tell them to go pound sand.

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