
November 4, 2007

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Weed It and Reap

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FOR Americans who have been looking to Congress to reform the food system, these past few weeks have been, well, the best of times and the worst of times. A new politics has sprouted up around the farm bill, traditionally a parochial piece of legislation thrashed out in private between the various agricultural interests (wheat growers versus corn growers; meatpackers versus ranchers) without a whole lot of input or attention from mere eaters.

Not this year. The eaters have spoken, much to the consternation of farm-state legislators who have fought hard — and at least so far with success — to preserve the status quo.

Americans have begun to ask why the farm bill is subsidizing high-fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated oils at a time when rates of diabetes and obesity among children are soaring, or why the farm bill is underwriting factory farming (with subsidized grain) when feedlot wastes are polluting the countryside and, all too often, the meat supply. For the first time, the public health community has raised its voice in support of overturning farm policies that subsidize precisely the wrong kind of calories (added fat and added sugar), helping to make Twinkies cheaper than carrots and Coca-Cola competitive with water. Also for the first time, the international development community has weighed in on the debate, arguing that subsidized American exports are hobbling cotton farmers in Nigeria and corn farmers in Mexico.

On Capitol Hill, hearings on the farm bill have been packed, and newspapers like The San Francisco Chronicle are covering the legislation as closely as The Des Moines Register, bringing an unprecedented level of attention to what has long been one of the most obscure and least sexy pieces of legislation in Congress. Sensing the winds of reform at his back, Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, told a reporter in July: “This is not just a farm bill. It’s a food bill, and Americans who eat want a stake in it.”

Right now, that stake is looking more like a toothpick. Americans who eat have little to celebrate in the bill that Mr. Harkin is expected to bring to the floor this week. Like the House bill passed in July, the Senate product is very much a farm bill in the tradition- al let-them-eat-high-fructose-corn-syrup mold.

For starters, the Old Guard on both agriculture committees has managed to preserve the entire hoary contraption of direct payments, countercyclical payments and loan deficiency payments that subsidize the five big commodity crops — corn, wheat, rice, soybeans and cotton — to the tune of \$42 billion over five years.

The Old Guard has also managed to add a \$5 billion “permanent disaster” program (excuse me, but isn’t a permanent disaster a contradiction in terms?) to help farmers in the High Plains struggling to grow crops in a drought-prone region that, as the chronic need for disaster aid suggests, might not be the best place to grow crops.

When you consider that farm income is at record levels (thanks to the ethanol boom, itself fueled by another set of federal subsidies); that the World Trade Organization has ruled that several of these subsidies are illegal; that the federal government is broke and the president is threatening a veto, bringing forth a \$288 billion farm bill that guarantees billions in payments to commodity farmers seems impressively defiant.

How could this have happened? For starters, farm bill critics did a far better job demonizing subsidies, and depicting commodity farmers as welfare queens, than they did proposing alternative — and politically appealing — forms of farm support. And then the farm lobby did what it has always done: bought off its critics with “programs.” For that reason “Americans who eat” can expect some nutritious crumbs from the farm bill, just enough to ensure that reform-minded legislators will hold their noses and support it.

It’s an old story: the “hunger lobby” gets its food stamps so long as the farm lobby can have its subsidies. Similar, if less lavish, terms are now being offered to the public health and environmental “interests” to get them on board. That’s why there’s more money in this farm bill for nutrition programs and, for the first time, about \$2 billion to support “specialty crops” — farm-bill-speak for the kind of food people actually eat. (Since California grows most of the nation’s specialty crops, this was the price for the state delegation’s support. Cheap indeed!)

There’s also money for the environment: an additional \$4 billion in the Senate bill to protect wetlands and grasslands and reward farmers for environmental stewardship, and billions in the House bill for environmental cleanup. There’s an important provision in both bills that will make it easier for schools to buy food from local farmers. And there’s money to promote farmers’ markets and otherwise support the local food movement.

But as important as these programs are, they are just programs — mere fleas on the elephant in the room. The name of that elephant is the commodity title, the all-important subsidy section of the bill. It dictates the rules of the entire food system. As long as the commodity title remains untouched, the way we eat will remain unchanged.

The explanation for this is straightforward. We would not need all these nutrition programs if the commodity title didn’t do such a good job making junk food and fast food so ubiquitous and cheap. Food stamps are crucial, surely, but they will be spent on processed rather than real food as long as the commodity title makes calories of fat and sugar the best deal in the supermarket. We would not need all these conservation programs if the commodity title, by paying farmers by the bushel, didn’t encourage them to maximize production with agrochemicals and plant their farms with just one crop fence row to fence row.

And the government would not need to pay feedlots to clean up the water or upgrade their manure pits if subsidized grain didn’t make rearing animals on feedlots more economical than keeping them on farms. Why does the farm bill pay feedlots to install waste treatment systems rather than simply pay ranchers to keep their animals on grass, where the soil would be only too happy to treat their waste at no cost?

However many worthwhile programs get tacked onto the farm bill to buy off its critics, they won’t bring meaningful reform to the American food system until the subsidies are addressed — until the underlying rules of the food game are rewritten. This is a conversation that the Old Guard on the agriculture committees simply does not want to have, at least not with us.

But its defiance on the subsidy question may actually be a sign of weakness, for one detects a note of defensiveness creeping into the rhetoric. “I know people on the outside can sit and complain about this,” Representative Collin

Peterson of Minnesota, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, told The San Francisco Chronicle last summer. “But frankly most of those people have no clue what they’re talking about. Most people in the city have no concept of what’s going on here.”

It seems more likely that, this time around, people in the city and all across the country know exactly what’s going on — they just don’t like it.

Mr. Peterson’s farm bill passed the House by the smallest margin in years, and might have been picked apart on the floor if Representative Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the House, hadn’t leapt to its defense.

(She claimed to be helping freshmen Democrats from rural districts.)

But Senate rules are different, and Mr. Harkin’s bill will be challenged on the floor and very possibly improved. One sensible amendment that Senator Byron Dorgan, Democrat of North Dakota, and Senator Chuck Grassley, Republican of Iowa, are expected to introduce would put a \$250,000 cap on the payments any one farmer can receive in a year. This would free roughly \$1 billion for other purposes (like food stamps and conservation) and slow the consolidation of farms in the Midwest.

A more radical alternative proposed by Senator Richard Lugar, Republican of Indiana, and Senator Frank Lautenberg, Democrat of New Jersey, would scrap the current subsidy system and replace it with a form of free government revenue insurance for all American farmers and ranchers, including the ones who grow actual food. Commodity farmers would receive a payment only when their income dropped more than 15 percent as the result of bad weather or price collapse. The \$20 billion saved under this plan, called the Fresh Act, would go to conservation and nutrition programs, as well as to deficit reduction.

What finally emerges from Congress depends on exactly who is paying closest attention next week on the Senate floor and then later in the conference committee. We know the American Farm Bureau will be on the case, defending the commodity title on behalf of those who benefit from it most: the biggest commodity farmers, the corporations who sell them chemicals and equipment and, most of all, the buyers of cheap agricultural commodities — companies like Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, Coca-Cola and McDonald’s.

In the past that alliance could have passed a farm bill like this one without breaking a sweat. But the politics of food have changed, and probably for good. If the eaters and all the other “people on the outside” make themselves heard, we just might end up with something that looks less like a farm bill and more like the food bill a poorly fed America so badly needs.

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