



The 2012 Farm Bill: An Opportunity to Support Farmers and Promote Public Health

Policy Highlight

POLICY PERSPECTIVE

The Farm Bill governs the bulk of federal agriculture and nutrition programs. It contains 15 titles covering, among other things, direct payments to growers of selected commodities, such as wheat and feed grains; domestic food and nutrition distribution programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); and crop insurance programs that provide farmers with financial protection against crop losses. The Congressional Budget Office estimated the total cost of the last Farm Bill, authorized in June 2008, at \$284 billion.³ The legislation will be up for reauthorization in fiscal year 2012.

Work already has begun on the reauthorization of the Farm Bill. The House Agriculture Committee has been holding a series of hearings, both in Washington, D.C., and across the country to review U.S. agriculture policy in advance of the 2012 reauthorization, and the U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee has begun its review as well. Congress uses information presented by witnesses to shape the content of the bill before it is introduced.

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack has outlined the department's priorities for the new Farm Bill and is beginning to host a series of town hall hearings across the nation to receive suggestions on how to strengthen the law. In the meantime, USDA is accepting comments on proposed and interim rules to the 2008 Farm Bill.

Background

Today, many of our communities are unhealthy—dominated by fast food, with few full-service grocery stores that stock affordable healthy foods. In addition, many students receive school meals that do not meet federal dietary guidelines. Almost a third of our nation's young people are overweight or obese, and youth from low-income households, Blacks, Latinos, American Indians and those living in the southern part of the United States tend to be disproportionately affected.¹ Success in reducing and preventing the childhood obesity epidemic will depend in part on the degree of success farmers experience in producing and marketing healthy crops, such as fruits and vegetables. Fruit and vegetable consumption—as part of a healthy diet—is important for supporting healthy growth among children and preventing chronic disease. In addition, research shows that when healthy foods like fruits and vegetables are more affordable, children are less likely to gain excessive weight.²

Healthy Eating Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, commissioned the Farmers' Legal Action Group (FLAG) to perform a legal analysis of the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008, commonly referred to as the 2008 Farm Bill (PL 110–246). The report, *Planting the Seeds for Public Health: How the Farm Bill Can Help Farmers to Produce and Distribute Healthy Foods*, highlights the barriers the agriculture community faces in ensuring that our nation's children have ready access to healthy foods. This policy highlight synthesizes key findings from an analysis of the 2008 Farm Bill and identifies important opportunities in the upcoming 2012 Farm Bill.

Key Findings

This report focuses on the multiple, often overlooked ways in which federal policies discourage farmers from producing and strategically marketing food crops, such as fruits and vegetables. Some key findings include:

1. Fruit and vegetable farmers lack a safety net to protect them from natural disasters in a manner comparable to programs that are available for farmers producing major commodity crops, such as corn, soybeans and wheat;
2. Fruit and vegetable price and yield data are not collected to ensure a robust body of knowledge to guide policy regarding these important sectors of agriculture;
3. Crop insurance, disaster assistance, and loan and conservation programs are not designed to address the unique characteristics of fruit and vegetable production and marketing; and
4. Nutrition program expenditures are not adequately directed to ensure children, including those from low-income households, receive healthy food.

FAST FACTS

- Of the 2008 Farm Bill's \$284 billion expenditure, about \$189 billion (67 percent) will support the cost of nutrition programs—primarily SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamp Program; \$42 billion (15 percent) will support payment programs for commodity crops, such as corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton and rice; and \$22 billion (8 percent) will support crop insurance. These three program categories will account for about 90 percent of all Farm Bill spending.
- Researchers have only just begun to study whether the United States would have the capacity to produce and distribute enough fruits and vegetables to meet the need if every person were to eat the recommended servings under national dietary guidelines.^{4,5,6,7}
- The number of acres devoted to the production of fruits and vegetables is about 2.5 percent of the total U.S. cropland under production; some USDA programs define fruits and vegetables as “specialty crops.”⁸
- The federal support payments for commodity crops have slowed the increase in real prices of grain starches, oils, meats and sweeteners over the past few decades, while fruits and vegetables have become more expensive, in relative terms, more quickly.⁹
- USDA purchases more than \$5 billion per year in goods and services. Approximately 60 percent of these dollars are spent on food commodities for child nutrition and adult feeding programs. This provides a substantial opportunity to encourage production of fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods, while improving access in low-income communities.¹⁰

Policy Recommendations

There are many opportunities for the farm and public health communities to work together with other stakeholders in implementing policy changes to address some of the key challenges outlined in the report. Some program policy changes could be made by USDA without the need for additional direction from Congress, but in some cases, Farm Bill action will be required. Key policy recommendations include:

- Provide crop insurance for fruits and vegetables and disaster assistance coverage equivalent to that provided for farmers who grow non-perishable commodities. Providing crop insurance to fruit and vegetable farmers would decrease the financial risk associated with producing these crops.
- Explore policy changes to enable farmers participating in the commodity programs to use program acres for the planting of fruits and vegetables.
- Encourage farmers, public health leaders and consumer advocates to identify ways to increase demand for fruits and vegetables in order to keep pace with increases in supply. Develop strong and durable production and marketing chains to meet those demands.
- Collect and use price and yield data for specialty crops by type, variety and intended use in order to better inform the development of federal policies and make the production and marketing of fruits and vegetables more attractive to agricultural lenders.
- Ensure that USDA procurement decisions serve the two stated goals of most nutrition programs—improving program participants’ nutrition, as well as providing markets for agricultural crops produced by U.S. farmers.
- Incorporate a preference for the purchase of local foods in all USDA procurement policies.
- Increase funding, education and technical assistance for farmers’ markets to adopt the use of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) for SNAP and participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program and the WIC Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.

Endnotes

- 1 Wang Y and Beydoun M. “The Obesity Epidemic in the United States—Gender, Age, Socioeconomic, Racial/Ethnic, and Geographic Characteristics: A Systematic Review and Meta-Regression Analysis.” *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 29:6–28, May 2007.
- 2 Strum R and Datar A. “Food Prices and Weight Gain During Elementary School: 5-year Update.” *Public Health*, 122 (11):1140–1143, November 2008.
- 3 *The 2008 Farm Bill: Major Provisions and Legislative Action*. Washington: Congressional Research Service, October 2008, <http://ncseonline.org/NLE/CRSreports/08Jun/RL33934.pdf> (accessed July 2010).
- 4 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 2005. Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005, www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines (accessed July 2010).
- 5 Meter K and Rosales J. “Finding Food in Farm Country.” Minneapolis: Crossroads Resource Center, 2001, www.crcworks.org/fj.pdf (accessed July 2010).
- 6 *Local Foodshed Mapping Tool for New York State*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Department of Crop and Soil Sciences, 2007, www.cals.cornell.edu/cals/css/extension/foodshed-mapping.cfm (accessed July 2010).
- 7 Gussow J. “Reflections on Nutritional Health and the Environment: The Journey to Sustainability.” *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 1:1, 3–26, August 2006.
- 8 Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108–465, 118 Stat. 3882 (Dec. 21, 2004) (codified at 7 U.S.C. 1621 notes § 3). This definition is incorporated into the 2008 Farm Bill §§ 7311 (Specialty Crop Research Initiative), 10,001 (Definitions), 10,103 (Inclusion of Specialty Crops in Census of Agriculture), and 10,109 (Specialty Crop Block Grants).
- 9 Wallinga D. “Today’s Food System: How Healthy Is It?” *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 4:3, 251–281, July 2009.
- 10 *USDA Food Commodity Contracting Opportunities for Rural America*. United States Department of Agriculture, 2009, www.da.usda.gov/smallbus/WebsiteStoryBoard.htm (accessed July 2010).