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Photo: USDA

## Farm Bill Fiasco: What Next for the Food Movement?

By Christopher D. Cook\*

Deciding how America will nourish itself and sustain its farms would seem a top policy priority—yet as the US Farm Bill demonstrates, sustainably grown, healthy food and livable incomes for farmers and workers remain an afterthought in a process controlled almost entirely by agribusiness and a handful of farm-state legislators. Despite strong public opinion supporting local food, farmer's markets, organic agriculture, food workers' rights and access to fresh produce, agribusiness and commodity interests continue to dominate food and farming policy.

That's largely due to their prodigious lobbying clout: agribusiness spent \$137 million last year muscling Congress to do its bidding and another \$46.6 million on federal candidates (about 60 percent Republican) in 2010.<sup>1</sup> This phalanx of power includes commodity producer groups like the American Corn Growers Association; corporate food processors and purveyors such as Kraft and Dean Foods; the Farm Bureau; dairy and meat industry giants; and seed and petrochemical corporations like Monsanto.

On the other side, armed with ideas and passion but little money, stand hundreds of groups from across the US pressing Congress on an array of policies—including commodity subsidy reform, fair prices for farmers, public monies for local foods and small farmers, and conservation and nutrition funding. With a handful of lobbyists and diverse interests, they fight doggedly for small wedges of the Farm Bill pie.

But is the Farm Bill a productive venue for food movements to make meaningful change in food and farming policy?

### Reforms Thrown Off the Cliff

In the 2012-2013 version, after months of work by dozens of advocacy groups, a promising Farm Bill sponsored by Michigan Senator and agriculture committee chair Debbie Stabenow —protecting nutrition and conservation while reforming subsidy inequities and supporting local food—was

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hijacked in a New Year's Eve "fiscal cliff" budget deal struck by Senator Mitch McConnell and Vice President Joe Biden.

According to the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the McConnell-Biden deal "disposed of programs for new farmers, minority farmers, healthy food markets, rural job programs, renewable energy, specialty crop and organic research and organic farming, and protected every last red cent of direct commodity subsidies."<sup>2</sup> The deal was "a complete blow to local food and farming," slicing out \$80 million in funding for those priorities, adds Kari Hamerschlag of the Environmental Working Group.

The fiscal cliff and Farm Bill extensions—now being challenged by new measures in Congress—maintained a disastrous status quo:

- Deeply inequitable subsidies and crop insurance payments skewed to the wealthiest farms, primarily for monocrop production of commodities (e.g. corn and soy) for food additives, livestock feed and fuel
- No livable wage guarantees for farmers and workers who still toil within a corporate-controlled "cheap food" economy that systematically exploits them
- Chemical-intensive farming identified by the EPA as a top polluter of over half of the country's rivers and streams<sup>3</sup>
- Meager public investment in fruits, vegetables and organic farming despite evidence showing they are far healthier for us and for the planet than subsidized commodity crops
- Despite evidence of industrial agriculture's contributions to global climate change, government policies still promote chemically intensive farming and emergency payments for drought and crop disasters, rather than investing in sustainable farming to address the root of the problem
- Ignoring the blatant connections

between commodity subsidies, junk food and obesity, the Farm Bill continues to incentivize mass production of commodities like corn and soy as "inputs" to sodas, fast food and industrially produced meat.

While imposing austerity to avoid the fiscal cliff—and pandering to the agribusiness lobby—the bill sends our food system careening towards a very different cliff: social, economic and environmental catastrophe. Daniel Imhoff, author of *Food Fight!*, notes that encouraging the expansion of commodity production is likely to have devastating environmental consequences:

The subsidy system really exists to ensure that lenders and insurers get paid for keeping the commodity crapshoot afloat. It's especially important as more and more crops fry in the summer sun or are flooded out by mega-storms. Crop insurance—with no ties to conservation requirements, along with no increase in Conservation Reserve Program rental rates—has led to a massive plow-up across the Midwest. We are well set up for another Dust Bowl.<sup>4</sup>

Farm Bill policies threaten to decimate the fertility of large swaths of US farmland. Those who will suffer most are farming families and poor consumers—in the US and around the world—subjected to extreme food price volatility while agrifood monopolies continue to reap enormous profits.

The *global* reach of the US Farm Bill is vast. As the world's largest exporter of agricultural commodities, "US agriculture policy is, effectively, trade policy" notes Gawain Kripke, director of policy and research at Oxfam America.<sup>5</sup> The Farm Bill encourages farmers to overproduce. The surplus is then "dumped" on foreign markets—either as food aid or commercial exports—at below the cost of production, a practice that

destroys farmer livelihoods and food systems in the Global South, making them dependent on US imports.<sup>6</sup>

This structural dependence makes poor countries vulnerable to environmental shocks and speculative bubbles that send food prices soaring—leading to social upheavals like the 2008 food rebellions and the 2011 "Arab Spring" uprisings. In 2012, a severe Midwest drought that affected 80 percent of the US corn crop triggered a spike in global prices, with ripples throughout the food system. Combined with a renewable fuel mandate that diverts nearly 40 percent of US corn to ethanol production, food-importing countries were hit especially hard.<sup>7</sup> In the same year, investment firm Goldman Sachs made an estimated \$400 million betting on global food prices.<sup>8</sup>

The increasing influence of financial companies, pension funds and sovereign wealth funds in the food system is part of a growing "financialization" of food, water and land. In *Bet the Farm*, Frederick Kaufman explains how food has "become an investment, equivalent to oil, gold, silver, or any other commodity, equity, or derivative. The higher the price, the better the investment. The better the investment, the more costly the food. And those who cannot pay the price pay with hunger."<sup>9</sup>

With such high stakes, the Farm Bill is difficult to ignore, even as it is controlled by corporate interests and seemingly impermeable to reform. If there is any hope, it lies in the growing US food movement. But to steer a truly sustainable and equitable course, it must build a powerful, unified voice and demand a radical change in direction.

### The Search for Unity

The Farm Bill's sheer size and its maze of policy "silos" make unifying for reform exceedingly difficult.



GOAT Meeting on 2012 Farm Bill. Photo: Rural Coalition

Coalitions often break down once the nickel and diming begins. “There’s not a unity of perspective,” says Andy Fisher, longtime community food security organizer who has navigated several farm bills since the 1990s. “We don’t have enough people in DC lobbying for our side. We haven’t been able to organize well enough to affect the real balance of power and make substantive changes. Historically, the anti-hunger and sustainable agriculture interests have not come together on a progressive platform.”

Yet Hamerschlag and others argue that despite all the defeats, it’s important to keep fighting for a seat at the table. “We have to keep being there to speak truth to the process and make the bad parts of the Farm Bill better,” she says. “If we don’t show up, we’re never going to improve it.” One salvo galvanizing support is the Local Farms, Food, and Jobs Act reintroduced in early April by Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio and Maine Representative Chellie Pingree. When first proposed in 2011, the bill—proposing incentives for local foods, greater access to fresh produce for food stamp recipients, access to credit for small and beginning farmers, and more—garnered support from nearly 100 co-sponsors and over 280 organizational supporters.<sup>10</sup>

In February 2013 more than 150 organizations from across the US signed a “Statement on Sequestration and Fairness in the Farm Bill” denouncing the secrecy and inequity of the McConnell-Biden deal. After months of good-faith negotiations,

the statement read: “[we] were shocked to learn that this agreement had been replaced by a partial and very biased extension that left out the farmers, fishers, ranchers, Tribal Nations, farmworkers, and rural, urban and small business communities we represent.”<sup>11</sup>

Food movement coalitions are emerging to build a coherent platform for change.<sup>12</sup> Getting Our Act Together (GOAT), for instance, is a loose alliance through which dozens of US groups discuss and collaborate on “issues of equity, justice, and access across the titles of the 2012 Farm Bill and beyond.”<sup>13</sup> GOAT’s list of key issues includes equity and civil rights for farmers of color; hunger and food stamps; conservation and sustainability; rural poverty; access to credit and land; and justice for food workers.

Iowa farmer George Naylor, former president of the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), calls for a radically different government role in regulating the food system: production quotas and price guarantees for farmers; and planning food production around what the land can sustain, what farmers need to survive and what the country needs for a healthy food supply.

“The question is, how are we going to use our land? We obviously need to use it in a much more sustainable way within ecological limits,” Naylor says. Farm policy should “take assessment of how much food we need and what kind of food we need,” and guarantee fair prices for farmers. The “free market” simply pushes farmers to plant “fencerow to fencerow” with little incentive to sustain the land or grow healthy food instead of commodities, Naylor explains.

As NFFC executive director Kathy Ozer puts it, “a lot of people acknowledge the system is broken—we need to be clear that workers

and farmers, everyone in the food chain, needs a fair return. That’s central to a cohesive agenda.” The Farm Bill divides our communities and movements into “issues”—we need to mobilize around a broad vision of food justice and food sovereignty that unites us instead. The challenge is to converge our diverse communities and movements and challenge corporate power while deepening our work on the ground—for more land, more food and more dollars serving our communities instead of the corporate food regime.

## NOTES

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- Feb. 26 Statement on Sequestration and Fairness in the Farm Bill, product of GOAT process.
- In addition to GOAT, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) has put out a “Beyond the Farm Bill” call for a new framework and process: <http://iatp.org/documents/beyond-the-farm-bill>
- Community Food & Justice Coalition: <http://comfoodjustice.org/goat-process/>

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