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FOOD

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Utopian Dream: A New Farm Bill

IN THE FALL OF 2011, I taught a graduate food studies course at New York University devoted to the farm bill, a massive and massively opaque piece of legislation passed most recently in 2008 and up for renewal in 2012. The farm bill supports farmers, of course, but also specifies how the United States deals with such matters as conservation, forestry, energy policy, organic food production, international food aid, and domestic food assistance. My students came from programs in nutrition, food studies, public health, public policy, and law, all united in the belief that a smaller scale, more regionalized, and more sustainable food system would be healthier for people and the planet.

In the first class meeting, I asked students to suggest what an ideal farm bill should do. Their answers covered the territory: ensure enough food for the population at an affordable price; produce a surplus for international trade and aid; provide farmers with a sufficient income; protect farmers against the vagaries of weather and volatile markets; promote regional, seasonal, organic, and sustainable food production; conserve soil, land, and forest; protect water and air quality, natural resources, and wildlife; raise farm animals humanely; and provide farm workers with a living wage and decent working conditions. Overall, they advocated aligning agricultural policy with nutrition, health, and environmental policy—a tall order by any standard, but especially so given current political and economic realities.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CURRENT FARM BILL?

Plenty. Beyond providing an abundance of inexpensive food, the current farm bill addresses practically none of the other goals. It favors Big Agriculture over small; pesticides, fertilizers, and genetically modified crops over those raised organically and sustainably; and some regions of the country—notably the South and Midwest—over others. It supports commodity crops grown for animal feed but considers fruits and vegetables to be “specialty” crops deserving only token support. It provides incentives leading to crop overproduction, with enormous consequences for health.

Published in Dissent (2012), a political journal that includes social and cultural commentary on both American and European policy and politics. Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University, critiques the 2008 farm bill, which was up for renewal in 2012 and signed into law in 2014.

The bill does not require farmers to engage in conservation or safety practices (farms are exempt from having to comply with environmental or employment standards). It encourages production of feed crops for ethanol. In part because Congress insisted that gasoline must contain ethanol, 40 percent of U.S. feed corn was grown for that purpose in 2011, a well-documented cause of higher world food prices. Because the bill subsidizes production, it gets the United States in trouble with international trading partners, and hurts farmers in developing countries by undercutting their prices. Taken as a whole, the farm bill is profoundly undemocratic. It is so big and so complex that nobody in Congress or anywhere else can grasp its entirety, making it especially vulnerable to influence by lobbyists for special interests.

Although the farm bill started out in the Great Depression of the 1930s as a collection of emergency measures to protect the income of farmers—all small landholders by today's standards—recipients soon grew dependent on support programs and began to view them as entitlements. Perceived entitlements became incentives for making farms larger; increasingly dependent on pesticide, herbicide, and fertilizer “inputs”; and exploitative of natural and human resources. Big farms drove out small, while technological advances increased production. These trends were institutionalized by cozy relationships among large agricultural producers, farm-state members of congressional agricultural committees, and a Department of Agriculture (USDA) explicitly committed to promoting commodity production.

These players were not, however, sitting around conference tables to create agricultural policies to further national goals. Instead, they used the bill as a way to obtain earmarks—programs that would benefit specific interest groups. It is now a 663-page piece of legislation with a table of contents that alone takes up 14 pages. As the chief vehicle of agricultural policy in the United States, it reflects no overriding goals or philosophy. It is simply a collection of hundreds of largely disconnected programs dispensing public benefits to one group or another, each with its own dedicated constituency and lobbyists. The most controversial farm bill programs benefit only a few basic food commodities—corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, cotton, sugar, and dairy. But lesser-known provisions help much smaller industries such as asparagus, honey, or Hass avocados, although at tiny fractions of the size of commodity payments.

The bill organizes its programs into fifteen “titles” dealing with its various purposes. I once tried to list every program included in each title, but soon gave up. The bill's size, scope, and level of detail are mind-numbing. It can only be understood one program at a time. Hence, lobbyists.

The elephant in the farm bill—its biggest program by far and accounting for nearly 85 percent of the funding—is SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps). In 2011, as a result of the declining economy and high unemployment, SNAP benefits grew to cover forty-six million Americans at a cost of \$72 billion. In contrast, commodity subsidies cost “only” \$8 billion; crop insurance \$4.5 billion; and conservation about \$5 billion. The amounts expended on the hundreds of other programs covered by the bill are trivial in comparison, millions, not billions—mere rounding errors.

What is SNAP doing in the farm bill? Politics makes strange bedfellows, and SNAP exemplifies logrolling politics in action. By the late 1970s, consolidation of farms had reduced the political power of agricultural states. To continue farm subsidies, representatives from agricultural states needed votes from legislators representing states with large, low-income urban populations. And those legislators needed votes from agricultural states to pass food assistance bills. They traded votes in an unholy alliance that pleased Big Agriculture as well as advocates for the poor. Neither group wants the system changed.

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 10 The consequences of obesity—higher risks for heart disease, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, and other chronic conditions—are the most important health problems facing Americans today. To maintain weight or to prevent excessive gain, federal dietary guidelines advise consumption of diets rich in vegetables and fruits. The 2008 farm bill introduced a horticulture and organic title, but aside from a farmers' market promotion program and some smaller marketing programs, does little to encourage vegetable and fruit production or to subsidize their costs to consumers. If anything, the farm bill encourages weight gain by subsidizing commodity crops that constitute the basic cheap caloric ingredients used in processed foods—soy oil and corn sweeteners, for example—and by explicitly forbidding crop producers from growing fruits and vegetables.

Neither human nature nor genetics have changed in the last thirty years, meaning that widespread obesity must be understood as collateral damage resulting from changes in agricultural, economic, and regulatory policy in the 1970s and early 1980s. These created today's "eat more" food environment, one in which it has become socially acceptable for food to be ubiquitous, eaten frequently, and in large portions.

For more than seventy years, from the early 1900s to the early 1980s, daily calorie availability remained relatively constant at about 3,200 per person. By the year 2000, however, available calories had increased to 3,900 per person per day, roughly twice the average need. People were not necessarily eating 700 more daily calories, as many were undoubtedly wasted. But the food containing those extra calories needed to be sold, thereby creating a marketing challenge for the food industry.

Why more calories became available after 1980 is a matter of some conjecture, but I believe the evidence points to three seemingly remote events that occurred at about that time: agriculture policies favoring overproduction, the onset of the shareholder value movement, and the deregulatory policies of the Reagan era.

In 1973 and 1977, Congress passed laws reversing long-standing farm policies aimed at protecting prices by limiting production. Subsidies increased in proportion to amounts grown, encouraging creation of larger and more productive farms. Indeed, production increased, and so did calories in the food supply and competition in the food industry. Companies were forced to find innovative ways to sell food products in an overabundant food economy.

Further increasing competition was the advent of the shareholder value 15 movement to force corporations to produce more immediate and higher returns on investment. The start of the movement is often attributed to a 1981 speech given by Jack Welch, then head of General Electric, in which he insisted that corporations owed shareholders the benefits of faster growth and higher profit margins. The movement caught on quickly, and Wall Street soon began to press companies to report growth in profits every quarter. Food companies, already selling products in an overabundant marketplace, now also had to grow their profits—and constantly.

Companies got some help when Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 on a platform of corporate deregulation. Reagan-era deregulatory policies removed limits on television marketing of food products to children and on health claims on food packages. Companies now had much more flexibility in advertising their products.

Together, these factors led food companies to consolidate, become larger, seek new markets, and find creative ways to expand sales in existing markets. The collateral result was a changed society. Today, in contrast to the early 1980s, it is socially acceptable to eat in places never before meant as restaurants, at any time of day, and in increasingly large amounts—all factors that encourage greater calorie intake. Food is now available in places never seen before: bookstores, libraries, and stores primarily selling drugs and cosmetics, gasoline, office supplies, furniture, and clothing.

As a result of the increased supply of food, prices dropped. It became relatively inexpensive to eat outside the home, especially at fast-food restaurants, and such places proliferated. Food prepared outside the home tends to be higher in calories, fast food especially so. It's not that people necessarily began to eat worse diets. They were just eating more food in general and, therefore, gaining weight. This happened with children, too. National food consumption surveys indicate that children get more of their daily calories from fast-food outlets than they do from schools, and that fast food is the largest contributor to the calories they consume outside the home.

To increase sales, companies promoted snacking. The low cost of basic food commodities allowed them to produce new snack products—twenty thousand or so a year, nearly half candies, gum, chips, and sodas. It became *normal* for children to regularly consume fast foods, snacks, and sodas. An astonishing 40 percent of the calories in the diets of children and adolescents now derive from such foods. In adults and children, the habitual consumption of sodas and snacks is associated with increases in calorie intake and body weight.

Food quantity is the critical issue in weight gain. Once foods became relatively 20 inexpensive in comparison to the cost of rent or labor, companies could offer foods and beverages in larger sizes at favorable prices as a means to attract bargain-conscious customers. Larger portions have more calories. But they also encourage people to eat more and to underestimate the number of calories consumed. The well-documented increase in portion sizes since 1980 is by itself sufficient to explain rising levels of obesity.

Food prices are also a major factor in food choice. It is difficult to argue against low prices and I won't—except to note that the current industrialized food system aims at producing food as cheaply as possible, externalizing the real costs to the environment and to human health. Prices, too, are a matter of policy. In the United States, the indexed price of sodas and snack foods has declined since 1980, but that of fruits and vegetables has increased by as much as 40 percent. The farm bill subsidizes animal feed and the ingredients in sodas and snack foods; it does not subsidize fruits and vegetables. How changes in food prices brought on by growth of crops for biofuels will affect health is as yet unknown but unlikely to be beneficial.

The deregulation of marketing also contributes to current obesity levels. Food companies spend billions of dollars a year to encourage people to buy their products, but foods marketed as “healthy”—whether or not they are—particularly encourage greater consumption. Federal agencies attempting to regulate food marketing, especially to children, have been blocked at every turn by food industries dependent on highly profitable “junk” foods for sales. Although food companies argue that body weight is a matter of personal choice, the power of today's overabundant, ubiquitous, and aggressively marketed food environment to promote greater calorie intake is enough to overcome biological controls over eating behavior. Even educated and relatively wealthy consumers have trouble dealing with this “eat more” environment.

FIXING THE FARM BILL

What could agriculture policies do to improve health now and in the future? Also plenty. When I first started teaching nutrition in the mid-1970s, my classes already included readings on the need to reform agricultural policy. Since then, one administration after another has tried to eliminate the most egregious subsidies (like those to landowners who don't farm) but failed when confronted with early primaries in Iowa. Defenders of the farm bill argue that the present system works well to ensure productivity, global competitiveness, and food security. Tinkering with the bill, they claim, will make little difference and could do harm. I disagree. The farm bill needs more than tinkering. It needs a major overhaul. My vision for the farm bill would restructure it to go beyond feeding people at the lowest possible cost to achieve several utopian goals:

Support farmers: The American Enterprise Institute and other conservative groups argue that farming is a business like any other and deserves no special protections. My NYU class thought otherwise. Food is essential for life, and government's role must be to ensure adequate food for people at an affordable price. Farmers deserve some help dealing with financial and climate risks, and some need it more than others. The farm bill should especially support more sustainable smaller-scale farming methods. And such programs should be available to farmers of fruits and vegetables and designed to encourage beginning farmers to grow specialty crops.

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Support the environment: The farm bill should require recipients of benefits to engage in environmentally sound production and conservation practices.

Production agriculture accounts for a significant fraction—10 percent to 20 percent—of greenhouse gas emissions. Sustainable farming methods have been shown to reduce emissions, return valuable nutrients to soil, and reduce the need for polluting pesticides and fertilizers, with only marginal losses in productivity.

Support human health: The United States does not currently grow enough fruits and vegetables to meet minimal dietary recommendations. The 2008 farm bill explicitly prohibits farms receiving support payments from growing fruits and vegetables. Instead, the bill should provide incentives for growing specialty crops. Support payments should be linked to requirements for farm-based safety procedures that prevent contamination with pathogens and pesticides.

Support farm workers: This one is obvious. Any farm receiving support benefits must pay its workers a living wage and adhere to all laws regarding housing and safety—in spirit as well as in letter.

Link nutrition policy to agricultural policy: If we must have SNAP in the farm bill, let's take advantage of that connection. Suppose SNAP benefits had to be spent mostly on real rather than processed foods, and were worth more when spent at farmers' markets. Pilot projects along these lines have been shown to work brilliantly. Consider what something like this might do for the income of small farmers as well as for the health of food assistance recipients. Policies that enable low-income families to access healthy foods wherever they shop are beyond the scope of the farm bill, but must also be part of any utopian agenda.

Apply health and conservation standards to animal agriculture: The livestock title of the farm bill should require animals to be raised and slaughtered humanely. It should require strict adherence to environmental and safety standards for conservation and protection of soil, water, and air quality.

Utopian? Absolutely. In the current political climate, the best anyone can hope for is a crumb or two thrown in these directions. The secret process for developing the 2012 farm bill contained a few such crumbs—more money for farmers' markets and for programs to take SNAP benefits further when spent on fruits and vegetables. Whether that bill would have been better or worse than the one we eventually end up with remains to be seen. But the failure of that process provides an opportunity to work toward a healthier food system by restructuring farm bill programs to focus them on health, safety, and environmental goals and social justice. These goals are well worth advocating now and in the future.

The one bright ray of hope about the farm bill comes from the burgeoning food movement. Grassroots groups working to promote local and regional foods, farmers' markets, urban farming, farm-to-school programs, animal welfare, and farm workers' rights join a long and honorable history of social movements such as those aimed at civil rights, women's rights, and environmentalism. Changing the food system is equally radical. But food has one particular advantage for advocacy. Food is universal. Everyone eats. Food is an easy entry point into conversations about social inequities. Even the least political person can understand injustices in the food system and be challenged to work to redress them.

Occupy Big Food is an integral part of Occupy Wall Street;¹ it should not be viewed as a special interest. The issues that drive both are the same: corporate control of government and society. The food movement—in all of its forms—seeks better health for people and the planet, goals that benefit everyone. It deserves the support of everyone advocating for democratic rights.

1. Protest movement against social and economic inequality that began on September 17, 2011, in New York City's Zuccotti Park. On October 29, 2011, Occupy Big Food protestors rallied in Zuccotti Park to draw attention to social and economic inequalities related to food.

MLA CITATION

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QUESTIONS

1. According to Marion Nestle, what are the main problems with the farm bill? What specific sentences and paragraphs illustrate her objections?
2. What are some of the causes of obesity that Nestle identifies? What evidence does she provide that links obesity to the farm bill?
3. What effect does Nestle's use of headings and subheadings have on your understanding of the text?
4. Write your own "Utopian Dream," an essay in which you address the problems with a specific piece of legislation (current legislation is available at congress.gov) and a plan for fixing that bill or act.