

Not your granddad's farm bill

For many years, farm bills were the province of legislators representing districts and states where farmers constituted a significant portion of the voters. Together these legislators were known as the “farm block” and they dominated the membership of the House and Senate agriculture committees. For the most part, the farm legislation they wrote represented the wishes of their constituents. On the ag committees, political party affiliation of members was less important than serving the needs of the farm communities they represented.

In the beginning, policies designed to reduce soil and water erosion provided the rationale for the federal government to get involved in agricultural policy as a means of stabilizing farm income during the Great Depression. Over time, the policy goals of some segments of production agriculture had a reduced environmental focus, resulting in the development of a distinct environmental lobby.

With the inclusion of the Food Stamp program—later renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—as a title in the farm bill, urban legislators joined their rural colleagues on the agriculture committees. Urban legislators worked to meet the needs of their low-income constituents—though it turns out that many rural areas have higher SNAP utilization rates than urban areas—while rural legislators continued to make sure that farm legislation met the needs of their voters.

As we wrote in the previous column, following the dramatic reduction in acreage under production in 1983—the result of the Payment in Kind (PIK) program and weather problems in several areas of the country—the agricultural input industry became a significant player in the design of agricultural programs. Their goal has been to keep as many acres as possible in production by eliminating any use of annual acreage reduction programs to balance supply with demand.

In the last decade-and-a-half, they have been joined by the crop insurance industry. When it comes to farm legislation, these two groups have been more concerned with their own profitability than the needs of either farmers or low-income citizens.

Given the changing demands of urban consumers for the food that they purchase and eat, it should come as no surprise that with “The Food and Farm Act” recently released by Congressman Earl Blumenauer who represents urban Portland, Oregon, consumers have joined the farm bill fray (<https://blumenauer.house.gov/>).

Blumenauer describes his rationale for developing “The Food and Farm Act” (TFFA) writing: “The Farm Bill is the most important yet underappreciated piece of federal legislation Congress regularly considers. Hopelessly complex and expensive, it sets national priorities for federal investment in our food and farm system, giving too much to the wrong people to grow the wrong food in the wrong places.

“At the same time, it maintains a pattern of cutting benefits for the most vulnerable people and doesn't do enough to support fruits and vegetables or the majority of small and mid-sized farmers and ranchers. In short, the bill misdirects federal resources while undermining human health, nutrition, carbon reduction, economic development, land conservation, and animal welfare.

“Congress can do better with the next Farm Bill by crafting a bill that redirects spending, promotes healthy food, and provides innovative solutions for environmental challenges.”

The TFFA, has 9 titles compared to 12 titles in the 2014 Farm Bill. Some of the TFFA titles are similar to current titles, others focus on issues addressed in current legislation, and three are new titles: Food Waste, Animal Welfare, and Regional Food Systems.

Some of the policy changes in the TFFA are sure to draw the immediate attention of producers of row crops. The TFFA calls for the elimination of the Agricultural Risk Coverage and the Price Loss Coverage programs while limiting the aggregate payment a farmer or agribusiness can receive from the commodity, conservation, and crop insurance programs to \$125,000 per year and reducing the Gross Income cap on payments from commodity and conservation programs from \$900,000 to \$500,000 and ensur[ing] that this limitation also covers crop insurance premium subsidies.

Other policy prescriptions enhance current policies by encouraging spending on healthy foods in grocery stores; providing support for beginning farmers and ranchers to enter and stay in the agriculture sector while assisting those who are ready to retire by helping them transition out of farming while keeping the industry vibrant.

The Animal Welfare title finalizes USDA's rule for Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices and prevents the USDA from skirting animal welfare standards at federal agricultural research centers.

Title IX: Regional Food Systems invests in existing programs and creates new ones to support vibrant local and regional food systems, increases transparency within USDA's existing programs, and streamlines grant program application procedures to make them more accessible.

Some of Blumenauer's proposals will run into strong opposition from farmers while others reflect changes that are already taking place in the practices of some farmers. Still others address changes in consumer demand for food products that embody animal welfare standards and the desire for local foods.

What is clear is that the concerns of consumers will play a part in the writing of this farm bill and those in the future.

One of our concerns with the TFFA is that it includes no policies to ameliorate the chronic low price and income problems that plague production agriculture.

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