

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

Numerous voices will influence the development of the 2007 Farm Bill

In early March we had the opportunity to participate in a conference that looked at the interrelationship between the obesity epidemic that is sweeping through US society and agricultural policy. Some have suggested that there is a connection between the low commodity prices of recent agricultural policy and the rapid increase in the number of people diagnosed as obese.

The focus of much of this concern is corn, *zea mays*, which is the raw product that can be made into a wide variety of products ranging from high fructose corn syrup that is consumed by humans to feed for poultry, pork, and beef. Before the recent ethanol-induced price spike in corn prices, corn prices languished in the \$2.00 price range for most of the last 8 years, triggering high subsidies that provided livestock producers and corn processors with feedstock at prices well below the cost of production.

Some nutritionists are concerned that US agricultural policy is subsidizing an energy dense/low nutrient agricultural crop like corn while paying less attention to high nutrient crops like fruits and vegetables that have fewer calories. They are arguing that nutritional issues need to receive more attention in the development of farm policy and the farm bill.

All of this translates into another voice that will be a part of the discussion surrounding the writing of the 2007 Farm Bill. As the proportion of farmers in the national population has declined, the number of non-farm people interested in the shape of the farm bill has increased to include environmentalists, farm preservationists, agribusinesses (both input suppliers and commodity handlers and processors), food stamp recipients, rural development specialists, and now those concerned with obesity.

What does all this mean for producers of the program crops? First, program crop farmers need to be able to explain the rationale for commodity programs—the lack of timely price-responsiveness on the part of both consumers and producers of major crops. Second, they are going to need to build alliances with a variety of other groups while seeking to establish an economic environment in which farm families can earn a living on the land.

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