



Public Health and the 2007 Farm Bill

What Americans eat directly affects their health. U.S. agricultural policy in turn influences what Americans eat. The 2007 Farm Bill provides a unique opportunity for the public health community to make headway against some of the root causes of obesity, diabetes, food insecurity, and inadequate nutrition in our country.

The Farm Bill is an omnibus piece of legislation, negotiated every 5 to 7 years, that sets federal policy on farm subsidies, nutrition programs (including food stamps, WIC, and school lunches), conservation programs, rural development, and agricultural research. The next Farm Bill is scheduled to be passed in 2007.

Health care professionals concerned with providing adequate childhood and senior nutrition, improving access to fruits and vegetables, reducing rates of hunger and food insecurity, and reducing subsidies that help drive a high sugar, low nutrient food system should take an interest in the 2007 Farm Bill. Investing in farm policy change in 2007 could yield significant public health benefits—and reduce health care costs—in the future.

Today's Agricultural Policy Undermines Public Health.

We spend more on health care costs as a society than ever before—over 16 percent of our GNP, or more than \$1.8 trillion per year. Poor or inadequate diets are driving an increasing percentage of health care spending. In 2002, \$92.6 billion was spent on health problems caused by obesity alone, roughly equivalent to the cost imposed on American society by smoking. A 2005 study estimated that, due to the rapid rise in obesity rates, today's youth might become the first generation to live shorter lives than their parents. Moreover, recent research has found a strong link between increased rates of obesity and diabetes and consumption of soda and fast food. Part of the blame for this mounting public health crisis lies with U.S. farm policy, which heavily subsidizes commodity grains (and, indirectly, high-fructose corn syrup) while failing to adequately support fruit and vegetable production and distribution.

America's obesity and diabetes crises coexist with growing rates of hunger and inadequate nutrition. Over one-third of Americans living below the poverty line don't have regular access to enough food to meet basic needs. 12 percent of all American households are food insecure—more than 36 million Americans and almost one in five children. Food insecure individuals in general have poorer health and are more likely to be hospitalized. If more resources were directed to food stamps, the WIC program, nutrition education, and access to healthy foods, U.S. farm policy could help end the dual tragedies of food insecurity and poor nutrition in America.

At present, however, U.S. agricultural policy establishes sound nutrition guidelines, grounded in science, which call for increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, nuts and whole grains—and then heavily subsidizes producers of corn, soy, cotton, and rice. This allocation of resources has an impact on prices. *From 1985-2000, the real price of fresh fruits and vegetables increased by almost 40 percent, while the real price of fats and sugars declined.* Subsidies for





American Farmland Trust

corn, soy, and other commodities have caused overproduction and artificially depressed the prices of derivatives like high-fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated vegetable oils.

Roughly \$20 billion is spent on such commodity subsidies annually. Those subsidies steal resources from needed investments in nutrition and food security. Moreover, commodity subsidies do not benefit most farmers. Producers of fruit, vegetables, nuts, and other “specialty crops” receive almost no federal support. Our farm policy is economically unsustainable, fails to meet the needs of most farmers, and promotes special interests over the public’s health. There is a better way.

Agricultural Policy Can Be Changed to Support and Improve Public Health.

The 2007 Farm Bill provides a unique opportunity to make major changes in U.S. farm policy. The budget deficit, WTO obligations, and declining public support for farm payments all make significant reform possible for the first time in decades. An informal coalition of interest groups can make it happen—one including the associations of farmers and ranchers who support change, public health and education professionals, conservation organizations, and hunger organizations.

Changing the commodity subsidy system would enable increased investment in programs that support nutrition, food security, and public health, such as:

- **Food stamps** and other food assistance programs, which improve the nutrition and food purchasing power of very low-income families.
- The **WIC Program**, which provides supplemental nutrition to low-income women, infants, and children below the age of 5. The long-term medical benefits and health care savings of WIC are extensively documented.
- The **School Lunch** and **School Breakfast** programs, which provide meals to millions of children each day. More funding would improve the nutritional content of these meals.
- The **Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program**, which provides free fruit and vegetables in a small number of schools. Increased funding would enable this program to expand to more states and school districts.
- The **Farm to Cafeteria Program**, which would offer grant money to cover the initial costs of incorporating locally-grown foods into school lunches, installing school gardens, and expanding school nutrition education.
- The **Farmers’ Market Promotion Program**, which provides grant funding to support the creation of farmers’ markets in new areas.
- The **Senior and WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Programs**, which help low-income individuals access fresh, low-cost produce available at farmers’ markets.
- The **Specialty Crops Block Grants**, which support producers of vegetables, fruits, and nuts by funding research, technical assistance, food safety and educational programs.
- The **Community Food Projects Program**, which offers grants to support projects that increase the availability of nutritious and fresh foods in low-income communities.





Many of these programs are starved for funds. The Farm to Cafeteria program receives no funding. The Farmers' Market Promotion Program receives only \$1 million per year. The Community Food Projects Program is funded at \$5 million per year. The Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program—which reaches only a few hundred schools nationwide—is funded at \$9 million per year. The Senior and WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs receive just \$15 million and \$20 million per year respectively. In total, these six programs receive less than *one-fifth of one percent* of the billions of subsidy dollars we give to wheat, corn, soy, and other commodity producers.

A comprehensive new direction for U.S. farm policy would not only enable increased investment in and the expansion of existing nutrition programs—it would also enable investment in research and extension to increase the production of fruit and vegetables, eventually reducing the cost of healthy foods. Increasing the supply of fruit and vegetables through research, extension, and investment in distribution infrastructure is in the interest of both the public health community and specialty crop farmers. A shared vision of a food system that brings healthier foods to more people could provide a solid foundation for collaboration in 2007.

American Farmland Trust is Building a Coalition for Change.

American Farmland Trust (AFT) has embarked on a campaign to create a new farm policy in 2007, one that saves our best land, helps protect the environment and produces healthy food.

For more than six decades, U.S. farm policy has accomplished a great deal. It no longer meets the needs of most farmers and ranchers, the land or the public. AFT has a plan for change, however: a vision of school children eating nutritious and fresh produce; of well-managed, protected farm and ranch land that provides clean water and wildlife habitat; of farmers and ranchers having a real safety net and options other than selling their land for development; of farm-produced renewable energy that reduces our dependence on foreign oil.

AFT has taken the lead in 2006 within the farm community by circulating specific, practical recommendations for policy reform. We have recommended replacing commodity subsidies with a lower-cost revenue insurance program and with “green payments” to farmers for supplying ecosystem services; improving existing conservation programs; and increasing investment in nutrition, food security, and fruit and vegetable productivity and distribution. A farm policy that promotes public health and meets the needs of all farmers—rather than just a select few—is possible. A broad coalition can make it happen in 2007.

For more information, please contact Jimmy Daukas, Farm Policy Campaign Director, at (202) 378-1242. Details on our policy recommendations can be found at:

- <http://www.farmland.org/programs/campaign/default.asp>
- http://www.farmland.org/programs/campaign/documents/AFT_Agenda2007_May06.pdf

