

Hunger Action Network of NYS

WHY WE CARE ABOUT the FOOD and FARM BILL

MORE Sustainable, Diversified FARMS, MORE Healthy FOOD, MORE Economic OPPORTUNITY

The Food and Farm Bill is the single greatest influence on what we eat in the United States, governing our food system, from producer to consumer. It comes up for reauthorization every five years. While the next target date is 2012, Congress is targeting massive cuts in Farm Bill spending as part of its deficit reduction package presently being considered.

The biggest funding in the Farm Bill is for the food stamp program, the nation's first line of defense against hunger. Unfortunately hunger has dramatically increased in recent years. The number of people using the state's food pantries and soup kitchens has increased by 60% over the last three years, with three million NYers using EFPs annually. A similar number also receive food stamp / SNAP benefits.

The farm bill was initially designed to help U.S. farmers. But over time it has become less and less successful at doing so. The farm bill includes commodity payments, which are cash payments made to farmers growing mostly five crops—corn, wheat, cotton, rice and soybeans (there are a total of 20 crops covered). Virtually no subsidies are provided for fruits and vegetables - even though these are key to a healthy diet.

The dumping of these subsidized commodities in third world countries have forced farmers off the land and contributes to the growing problem of hunger and the world food price crisis. The subsidies provided for corn ethanol also has a negative impact on world food prices and third world hunger.

The current system of commodity payments has helped large farmers put their neighbors out of business, and cost taxpayers billions of dollars in emergency assistance. Current subsidies support the overuse

of water, pesticide and nitrogenous fertilizer. The existing programs skew the benefits to the largest growers, divert scarce resources from rural development, and undercut farmers in the developing world. The bottom 80 percent of farmers received an average total payment of just \$579 per recipient; 62% of farmers receive no subsidies.

The Farm Bill inadequately promotes healthy food choices, such as fruits and vegetables. Instead, it yields foods with added sugars (derived from federally subsidized corn) and added fats (derived mainly from federally subsidized soy). The least healthful calories in the supermarket are the cheapest because the Food and Farm Bill encourages farmers to produce them. Nationally, 13 million more acres in fruit and vegetable production are needed for each of us to meet our minimum, healthful, dietary requirements.

Our food system leads to the paradox of widespread obesity and chronic hunger. Obesity and overweight are significant risk factors for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic diseases.

Food is connected not only to human health, but also to the health of our environment and our economy. Our food system has led to an unsustainable reliance on chemical inputs, oil, and long food chains, accounting for approximately 14 to 19 percent of national energy usage.

New York State has more than 36,000, mostly small, family farms, one to 99-acres, generating \$5 billion in revenue in 2007. However, this valuable resource is threatened, as we lose farmland to development, especially near cities, and it is difficult to find new farmers to replace retiring farmers.

Farm viability and access to healthy food are enhanced when regional food production, processing, distribution, and retail work together to build strong markets for healthy foods. Despite this, a relatively small number of large corporations increasingly control food production, availability, and cost. The increasing corporate control of our food system results in harmful social, environmental, and health consequences. The corporate consolidation of the food chain, increasingly have made it difficult for small and mid-sized farms to continue operation.

Our national food sovereignty is at risk: we are losing farm land; our farmers are fewer and older; we encourage mass mono-cropping; most of our fruits and vegetables are grown on land in danger of

development; and we import almost as many agricultural products as we export...all this while our population is growing. Preserving and increasing America's regional, agricultural capacities are matters of national security and essential to our long-term ability to adequately, and healthfully, sustain ourselves and our children. Not only is our own food sovereignty at risk, our farm and food policies risk the food sovereignty of other nations. Around the world, particularly in the global south, family farmers, and with them, local food self-sufficiency are disappearing primarily because of their inability to compete with subsidized commodity crops.

There is great opportunity to strengthen our regional farm and healthy food systems in the next Food and Farm Bill. While we consider the role of our government, including its relationship to our farms and our food, we must determine what in the Food and Farm Bill can best serve the common good.

As a matter of social justice and our core values, a decided majority of Americans believe that we must provide a vital, and equitable, food safety net. We have before us an opportunity to reevaluate our farm and food policies, maintaining the most beneficial and, when it makes good sense, changing others.

In changing the farm bill, our goals must include innovative policies and programs that support: universal healthy food access; ending hunger in America; small and mid-sized family farms and farmers; rural development; sustainable and diverse food production; preservation of our vital agricultural resources; farming and food as economic engines; our national food sovereignty, and, ultimately, our collective health and well-being.

To these ends, Hunger Action endorses five Principles that should be embodied in our nation's next Food and Farm Bill.