

The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future

# WHAT DOES THE 2007 U.S. FARM BILL HAVE TO DO WITH PUBLIC HEALTH?



The omnibus Farm Bill, due for renewal in 2007, is a major piece of legislation that helps shape farm production and what food are available in the U.S. Policies in recent Farm Bills have contributed to undermining public health, nutrition, the environment, and social equity. Public health, medical, nutrition, anti-hunger, trade and sustainable agriculture advocates are joining this year to speak up for a Farm Bill that serves broader social values. We intend for this document to stimulate discussion, interest and activity on Farm Bill issues within the public health and policy communities.

## 11 Ways the Farm Bill Impacts Public Health

**1. Promoting Unhealthy Foods:** There is a disconnect between the foods promoted in the US “Dietary Guidelines for Americans” and those currently supported through farm bill policy. US agricultural policy has contributed to over-production of corn and soy, driving down their market prices and enabling food processors to acquire them at prices below production costs. Food processors now use high fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated soy oil in most processed foods, making it convenient and affordable to purchase sweets and fats.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *Shift US investment emphasis from unhealthy to healthy foods, including: strengthening incentives and infrastructure to encourage more fruit/vegetable production; supporting better access to fresh foods; and funding programs to promote healthy food.*

**2. Lack of Access to Healthy Food:** Federal nutrition programs authorized in the Farm Bill (such as Food Stamps) do not reach all who are food-insecure and/or hungry and often do not provide adequate or optimal nutrition.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *Improve nutrition program access, especially for immigrants, who face policy and other barriers to participation. Increase benefits and provide education and incentives for healthy food choices.*

**3. Environmental Contamination:** Current farm policy encourages intensive farming methods that can erode soil quality, increase dependence on chemical fertilizers, and increase pest numbers and thus the need for pesticides. These chemicals can affect worker, community and consumer health. Industrial animal production also concentrates untreated manure waste far beyond the capacity to utilize it responsibly on nearby land. Degrading manure contains pathogens including antibiotic resistant bacteria, dust, and antibiotics along with a complex mixture of hundreds of volatile organic compounds, which harm workers and can pollute soil, air and water resources.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *Promote more sustainable methods through research, marketing, technical assistance, and farm transition support. Use incentives to: reduce chemical use; promote reducing and cleaning contamination; reduce concentrated food animal production; encourage planting diverse crops; and require responsible waste handling. Restrict funds to projects meeting or exceeding basic environmental guidelines that reflect a public health perspective.*

**4. Antibiotic Resistance:** Antibiotics are heavily administered to non-sick animals at sub-therapeutic levels in industrial food animal production to promote growth or to compensate for unhealthy conditions. This U.S. practice contributes to the epidemic of antibiotic resistance threatening humans with infections that are difficult or impossible to treat.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *Provide incentives to eliminate or reduce sub-therapeutic antibiotic use in healthy animals, stop use of important human antibiotics for growth promotion, and support related surveillance and research.*

**5. Resource Depletion, Greenhouse Gases:** The agricultural methods that dominate production today deplete resources including water, soil, and fossil fuels. Food production, including transportation and land use changes, is a top source of greenhouse gases. Resource depletion and climate change will affect human health in the short- and long terms.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *Support efforts to reduce resource use and support more local food production, processing and distribution.*

**6. Undermining Food Sovereignty:** The US distributes surplus commodity grains and other foods internationally as food aid or for sale at prices below the cost of production. While this practice reaches some in need, it has also contributed to undermining local farmers, economies, and self-sufficiency.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *Assure that international food aid and other food distribution helps rather than harms local agriculture.*

**7. Overly Cheap Feed Grains** Most U.S. corn and soybeans are eaten by animals at corporate-owned and vertically integrated industrial food animal production facilities. Public policies that keep the market price of feed grains below what it costs to produce them amount to a sizeable benefit. These businesses also enjoy an unfair advantage compared to producers of grass-fed meat, which can have higher concentrations of healthy nutrients and fatty acids. The price advantage may also spur increased consumption of lower-priced meat with more saturated fat.

**Public Health Recommendation:** *Support policies, including policies that affect feed prices, in order to help level the playing field between industrial food animal producers and those using more environmentally sound methods such as reduced animal concentration and grass feeding.*

**8. Promoting Conservation-Based Agriculture:** The Farm Bill's Conservation Security Program (CSP) provides funds and technical assistance to support farm conservation practices such as improving soil, water, air, energy, plant and animal life. Program implementation has been limited.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *Restore program cuts and expand CSP significantly to increase its impact.*

**9. Failure to Inform Consumers:** The 2002 farm bill required some country of origin labeling, but implementation has been delayed.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *Require labels indicating country of origin and genetic modification, to help assure consumer right to know, increase traceability for food safety, and raise consumer trust in labels as guides to informed food purchasing.*

**10. Farmer Livelihoods (US and International):** Crop subsidies disproportionately go to large producers. Almost all subsidy payments are simple "pass-throughs" going immediately from the farmer to fertilizer, seed and equipment producers. Past farm bills have provided some support to US rural development. International "dumping" of commodities threatens developing world farmer livelihoods. Several countries have challenged the legality of US subsidies under World Trade Organization agreements.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *To promote equity, farm bill support should be targeted to small and medium sized farms. Farm bill funds can help rural communities by enabling small farmers to remain on the land and by supporting infrastructure and economic development.*

**11. Food Safety:** While food safety was not a significant issue in earlier farm bills, current policy attention is expected to result in its inclusion in the 2007 farm bill. Food borne illness frequently begins with industrial food animal production and related waste management practices, leading to produce and meat contamination, often with drug-resistant organisms.

**Public Health Recommendations:** *Promote research and policy to help change the conditions causing contamination. Further develop surveillance infrastructure and policy, to support more effective prevention and response.*

**Public Health Oversight:** While not commonly thought of as public health policy, the Farm Bill has significant public health impact. *An independent review body should monitor the public health and community impacts of US agricultural policies, both domestically and abroad, and should make recommendations for improvement.*

### **Making Corn and Soy Cheap**

Historically, a key farm support mechanism in U.S. agricultural policy was a set of provisions to stabilize crop prices at levels to ensure fair wages for farmers. This was considered necessary given an inherent tendency in crop agriculture to overproduce. More recent farm policy has abandoned the goal of fair, stable prices. Instead, since the 1970s U.S. farm policy has promoted the high production of commodity crops, particularly corn and soybeans, in ways that have tended to drive market prices below the cost of producing these crops. Direct payments to farmers have provided short-term, though unsustainable, means for keeping farmers on the farm. These changes have contributed to overproduction, price instability, and greater public health effects, and are ultimately unsustainable. Some of the specific effects of current farm policy include:

- Oversupply, which further depresses prices;
- Ubiquitous food use of cheap, unhealthy additives such as high fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated soy oil;
- Low priced corn and soy animal feed which unfairly subsidizes industrial animal production companies and encourages expansion of their environmentally damaging practices;
- US dumping of commodity crops internationally, undercutting farmer earnings in other countries and damaging their economies;
- Overuse of chemicals and natural resources, as farmers try to increase yields.
- Increased disparities as large agribusinesses receive disproportionate subsidy payments.

Interventions to improve food system health and sustainability include: expand subsidies for 'green' methods; fund research, technical, and marketing assistance; support farm transitions to new methods/crops; enforce anti-trust laws; re-instate price supports; disallow dumping overseas; and improve food safety infrastructure.

### **Opportunities for Public Health Action**

There is great need for public health voices in policy debates. The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future is committed to serving as a resource to help educate public health professionals about the bill and to provide opportunities for policy participation. For more information, contact: Roni Neff, PhD, Research Director [rneff@jhsph.edu](mailto:rneff@jhsph.edu).