

Farm Bill a wasted chance

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Global food crisis? Consumers demanding more local, sustainable food from family farmers? Public health and environmental concerns over factory farms? The recently passed Farm Bill is an abysmal disappointment for those seeking solutions to these urgent questions. Despite the global food crisis and consumer demands for a healthier food system, Congress chose to stay with the failed status quo that favors industrial factory farms and corporate agribusiness profits over the interests of family farmers and consumers. While some critics of our farm programs targeted their ire towards “millionaire farmers” receiving subsidies, the main beneficiaries of our farm programs were able to escape scrutiny: corporate agribusinesses.

With commodity prices skyrocketing around the world and hunger on the rise here in the U.S., Congress chose to ignore the crisis by refusing to consider implementing Strategic Grain Reserves and reviving Farmer-Owned Reserves. While China and India build up their buffer stocks and the European Union considers establishing reserves, the United States continues its policy to allow our food security to be at the mercy of speculative global markets. Under the radical deregulation of the 1996 Freedom to Farm Act, government reserves were eliminated and control of grain stocks handed to corporate agribusiness giants. With nothing left in the cupboard, we are just one drought away from \$10 corn or \$20 wheat (per bushel) with no backup plan in place. Meanwhile, agribusiness companies have seen their profits explode as they take advantage of market speculation. In April 2008, Cargill reported a \$1 billion profit, up 86% from a year ago.

These same agribusinesses profited handsomely from commodity price collapses due to the deregulation effects of the 1996 Farm Bill. From 1997-2005, factory farm operators such as Cargill saved \$35 billion due to feed corn prices that dipped as low as \$1.50 per bushel, the same price farmers received in the 1970s! Grain reserves, by stabilizing prices, ensure that farmers do not have to rely on taxpayer subsidy payments by setting a floor on commodity prices so agribusiness can't underpay farmers. Reserves also help food processors and consumers crying out for relief.

During the years of cheap grain, factory farms escalated their expansion in rural America, wiping out family farmers and causing enormous environmental destruction. The Farm Bill for the first time offers some protections to independent ranchers and farmers who raise poultry and hogs under contracts with corporations such as Cargill and Smithfield. However, a decade-long battle to stop meatpackers from owning livestock was stripped out in the final bill as Congress failed to stand up for America's family farmers devastated by price manipulation. Such corporate control has sucked the lifeblood out of many rural communities.

A Brazilian meat company, JBS, has announced plans to acquire Smithfield Beef (which owns Five Rivers Ranch Cattle Feeding, the largest feedlot in the U.S.) and National Beef. This would mean three companies in the U.S. would control 90% of all slaughtered livestock, further consolidating the industry and driving out America's remaining independent livestock operations. Congress again chose to side with corporate agribusiness, even as two new reports from the Pew Commission and the Union of Concerned Scientists raised alarms over the public health, environmental and economic consequences of industrial factory farms. Without the packer ban and adequate antitrust measures to stop this merger, our domestic cattle industry is in jeopardy.

Recent food scares—from poisoned Chinese pet food to e.coli-tainted meat and spinach recalls—have caused consumers to take a heightened awareness about their food. While the Farm Bill includes significant increases in funding and program participation to help minority farmers such as myself, as well as for organic crops, farmers markets, and funding for innovative Community Food Projects, the bill represents a wasted opportunity to fundamentally alter our broken food system away from favoring the interests of corporate agribusiness towards sustainable family farmers. It continues to place our food sovereignty in jeopardy by neglecting Strategic Grain Reserves and livestock market reform and will not stop the continued hollowing out of rural America. With the global food crisis upon us, Congress has shirked its responsibility to ensure access for all to affordable food in an era of unprecedented risk.

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