

# From the Field to the Farm Bill: Can Federal Policy Changes Help Grow Local Food Systems?

March 2011

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*Strong local and regional food systems are essential to healthy, equitable, and sustainable systems of food and agriculture. Although originating within individual communities and regions, such local systems are nevertheless profoundly impacted by federal agriculture policies. At the heart of federal policy are the farm bill and its program of commodity crop price supports that have contributed to the dominance of large, industrialized farms over smaller operations. What are the opportunities for leveling the playing field?*

## **The Farm Bill**

The principal legislative mechanism for influencing agriculture policy is the farm bill, a statute that is reauthorized every four to five years. Since its inception in 1933, the farm bill has evolved through omnibus legislation to include a large nutrition assistance program, conservation, energy, global trade, and other miscellaneous agriculture programs in addition to the original farm and rural programs (Johnson 2010). The expansion of the farm bill over time served to include more diverse congressional interests with a stake in the legislation (Browne 1995, p. 34). However, in terms of agricultural policy, the principal and most controversial farm bill program is the commodity price support program, a program that provides direct annual payments to farmers of corn, wheat, soybeans, cotton, rice, and other crops when market prices drop below a certain target chosen by the USDA as the minimum price necessary for farmers to make a profit. Details of the price support program have varied over time, but this general concept has remained. The 60% of U.S. farmers who do not grow commodity crops, including those who provide fresh produce sold in grocery stores, do not receive any direct government assistance (Hosansky 2002).

The cyclical nature of farm bill reauthorization largely defines the nature of the policy process related to this issue. For each new farm bill, all programs from the previous bill must be reauthorized or deleted, and any new programs must be added. If a

bill should fail to pass, legislation reverts to the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, a highly disruptive and undesirable outcome. As a result, change to farm bills is inherently incremental and predictable, with methodic cycles of evaluation of legislation after a new bill is passed and subsequent alterations offered for the next bill reauthorization (Browne 1995, p. 45). New actors can thus enter and potentially influence the policy process through this predictable cycle.

## **History of Agricultural Policy**

The first farm price support and income programs for commodity crops were established by the original Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, when post-WWI economic difficulties, compounded by the start of the Great Depression, made the decision to address low crop prices affecting rural America widely acceptable politically, socially, and economically. At that time, the farming sector was composed largely of small family farms that depended on agriculture for their full income (Dimitri *et al.* 2005). Browne notes that “the agricultural policy domain exists because government chose to foster an industrial-based commercial rather than a subsistence farming,” and that government farm programs form the focal point of this policy (1995, p. 33). Until the 1970s, commodity price support programs implemented during the New Deal era aimed to prevent overproduction through strategies such as paying farmers to leave lands fallow when prices dropped, a tool for lowering production and allowing subsequent rising of prices back to a profitable level for farmers.

However, a drastic shift in political ideology occurred under President Nixon’s USDA Secretary, Earl Butz. Butz envisioned a highly industrialized food system that would feed the world cheaply and efficiently, fueled by massive production of commodity food crops, and subsequently encouraged farmers to plant “fencerow to fencerow.” Instead of paying farmers to decrease the acreage of land they farmed, USDA support shifted to direct payments to farmers for crops produced when prices were low

(Witteman 2008). After this shift in policy, market prices often dropped below the cost of production, resulting in further government payments to farmers. The year 1996 seemed to mark another shift in federal commodity support policy. Following a political sentiment to promote free trade and globalization of markets, subsidies to farmers were set at fixed but declining rates over 7 years, with the goal of slowly weaning farmers off federal aid. However, global market prices decreased, and farmers were given emergency support payments. As low market prices remained, these purportedly temporary measures continued to be renewed by subsequent farm bills.

At the same time, the 1996 bill further reduced controls on production by removing program limits on acreage that could be farmed and receive subsidies (F. Hoefner, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010; Hosansky 2002). This bill also eliminated the strategic grain reserve, a program where the government bought excess grain from farmers, in order to limit market supply and bring prices up, at the same time providing a supply of grain that could serve as an emergency reserve if production ever fell drastically (Witteman 2008).

Some smaller farm bill programs have grown over time; for example, programs that pay farmers to adopt various conservation practices were first integrated in the late 1930s. However, programs such as these continue to be dwarfed by the proportion of funding allocated to direct payments for production volume itself.

### **The Shifting Structure of American Agriculture**

Parallel to the evolution of federal subsidy policies for farmers has been a profound shift in the structure of the agriculture sector in the United States. From 1900 to 2002, the percentage of the American workforce employed in the agriculture sector plummeted from 41% to 1.9% (Dimitri *et al.* 2005). From small, more diversified, and often family-run farms, production has shifted to larger, more specialized, mechanized production enterprises. Smaller farms are forced to either grow to be competitive or leave the market, the latter being the inevitable result for many small farms. Technology played a large role in this shift, as more advanced tractors and less expensive fertilizers and pesticides made vast monoculture more productive and cost efficient.

Simultaneous industrialization of the food and livestock industries, with a high demand for commodity crops used extensively in processed food and animal feed, has been encouraged by the large-scale production of low-priced commodity crops. Starmer *et al.* (2006) found that the corporate broiler

chicken industry benefited significantly from agriculture policies resulting in low commodity crop prices, a finding that can also be extended to other industrial livestock operations. The authors thus posited that agriculture policy could be driving industrialization of the livestock industry by pushing feed prices below the actual production cost, making operations appear more economically efficient than they otherwise would be. A third interrelated factor is the increasing centralization of agriculture and food regulation, with health and safety standards adapting to larger, more industrialized systems of transport, processing, and manufacture of agriculture and food products (Dimitri *et al.* 2005).

The results of these evolutions in policy and structure with regard to agriculture and food markets have been the increased availability and low market price of certain foods, chiefly manufactured foods and grain-fed meat. More centralized industrial production, processing, and manufacturing coupled with relatively low oil prices have led to long-distance, complex networks of production in which food is shipped great distances from each stage in production and ultimately to the consumer, while maintaining a low retail price and a large profit margin for manufacturers. In addition, commodity crop programs prevent participating farmers from growing non-commodity crops or limit land used for these purposes to a small amount, a limitation that prevents farm diversification and drives up the cost of fresh produce (F. Hoefner, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010).

This complex, long-distance structure of food production, as well as the drastically decreased proportion of the population involved in agriculture, generally makes any connection or firsthand experience with one's food source impossible. A Worldwatch Institute study found that food typically travels 1,500 miles from farm to plate in the United States, or 25% farther than in 1980 (Halweil 2002). Despite the huge volume of crop production consumed by these food markets, further grain surpluses have additionally fed a growing agri-fuels industry as well as the global commodity crop market.

### **Framing the Policy Issue**

The local and regional food market arose in response to these profound changes in the production and consumption of agricultural goods. Significant attention in the U.S. was first focused on the issue in the context of the broader counterculture movement of the late 1960s, with the rise of communes. These emphasized cooperative living and self-sufficiency through direct working of the land. The local food movement is inevitably tied to the organic food

movement by the fundamental concept of breaking away from industrial forms of food production seen as harmful to human and environmental health and to local communities. The fight to save People's Park, a vacant lot in Berkeley, CA, that was co-opted by young people to plant organic vegetable gardens, as well as the opening by Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, serving local, organic, "whole" foods, are seen as the birth of the American local food movement (Glazer 2007).

This time period constitutes the first opening of the policy window, which has grown over time as the sustainable and local food movements have gathered momentum through expansion of grassroots organization and community action. Innovation and support for policy change frequently start in the non-profit sector, with policy following this trend. In addition, an affluent society may be a factor in the movement, allowing for concerns of food security, environmental impact, and public health at the societal level (J. Scholl, personal communication, Jan 12, 2010). Community and NGO groups have been successful in arousing the public in the past few decades, resulting in increased demand for transparency and accountability in the food system. Furthermore, in certain social strata, there has also been a shift in priorities toward the ideal food system (i.e. quality/ethics becoming more important than convenience/affordability), which has brought these issues to the attention of federal policy makers.

This movement sees the industrial scale of production and resulting disconnect between producers and consumers of food as the root of several problems. First, the market prices of these goods exclude the myriad environmental costs of such input-heavy production (fossil fuels and chemical and nutrient pollution) and long-distance transportation (fossil fuels). Second, while some argue that consolidation of the agriculture sector has freed up many rural residents for other employment (Dimitri *et al.* 2005), many others contend that the decline in small farms and decreased overall employment in farming has led to decreased economic and social vitality in rural areas, as jobs and social connections once supplied by farming were often never replaced (Wittman 2008). Third, the increasing abundance and affordability of processed foods and grain-fed meat is contrasted with the high cost of fresh, nutritious produce. This problem is especially acute in low-income areas where residents have little access to healthy food sources (Community Food Security Coalition).

Small farms that generally grow more diverse crops and keep local economies healthy are fundamentally disadvantaged by crop subsidies because they receive the same payment per bushel as

much larger firms that have lower production costs proportional to volume of output. Furthermore, payments to larger firms often are not absorbed as increased income for producers, but instead are bid into higher land prices, making the land and rental market more inaccessible to smaller firms (Hoefner, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010). Mid-sized farms are arguably most affected by this market environment, as they are unable to appeal to local niche markets in the way that small farms can and lack the regional market as well as the ability to compete with large-scale industrial farms on the national or global markets (F. Hoefner, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010).

In contrast to this framing, by pro-reform groups, of the current food system as problematic, interest groups that support production agriculture and a continuation of the current subsidy payment system frame the issue as one of food supply and affordability. These interests continue the mantra of Earl Butz that industrial, commodity agriculture "feeds the world", in addition to allowing Americans to spend a significantly smaller portion of their income on food. These advocates contend that local and organic production have no benefit over conventional farming, dismissing claims regarding health and environmental hazards of their production methods. They also argue that these alternative methods cannot compete with respect to efficiency and would be unable to feed the world's population.

Other interest groups, for example, the American Farmland Trust (AFT), strive to play a more neutral role. This NGO focuses on preservation of farmland in general and views local food as an alternative to industrial production but not a superior one. Jon Scholl, president of the organization, argues that small-scale and commercial farming can and should co-exist, filling diverse demands of food consumers (personal communication, Jan 12, 2010). This perspective takes a pragmatic approach to reform of commodity payments, seeing payments as a mechanism to help farmers cope with market fluctuations, while maintaining that some reform of commodity payments is justifiable (for example, payments based on revenue instead of production). Scholl observed that commodity programs historically considered production levels only, but that increasingly the wealth of the payment recipient is a relevant factor, worthy of consideration in federal policy. In addition, federal policy should expand other government programs to counteract imbalances between different sizes and types of farming operations. With this view, the AFT seeks to play a moderating role in the highly politicized arena of agriculture policy, inhabiting a middle ground between industrial firms and more environmentally

focused groups (Scholl, personal communication, Jan 12, 2010).

### **Structure of the Local Food Movement**

The local and regional food movement is largely decentralized in nature, due to the community and region-based focus of social and market change. The aim is to build direct ties from producer to consumer at the local and regional level, recognizing regional agricultural strengths and weaknesses. A regional market structure promotes increased economic vitality by keeping consumer dollars in the community or region and builds social ties through interaction based on food purchase and preparation. However, to build markets on a regional scale, significant improvement of infrastructure is needed.

The aim of local food movements inherently focuses on “whole foods” rather than processed manufactured food products. Proponents of “eating local” see a need to eat seasonally, with a recognition that the variety and consistency in produce made possible by a globalized food production system are not replicable by localized food networks. However, the movement also extols a learning of and appreciation for local food culture, in which people are encouraged to experiment with regional, somewhat less conventional foods (i.e., kale in the Northeast).

There is thus an inherent cultural component of the local foods movement, exemplified in the global “Slow Food” movement, which arose “to counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world. To do that, Slow Food brings together pleasure and responsibility, and makes them inseparable” (Slow Food USA). This idea calls for a much more complex and informed consideration of one’s food, a significant change from the current dominant food culture in the U.S. and elsewhere, in which convenience and affordability are chief concerns.

Though different groups may focus on or prioritize individual reform issues to some degree, proponents of this movement generally advocate policy reform to allow increased market access and competitive fairness for small and mid-sized farms, promote sustainable and organic farming methods, and facilitate local and regional markets for sustainably produced foods. Another important component is food justice, emphasizing healthy food access for children, minorities, and other socially vulnerable groups.

### **Policy Actors and Policy Strategies**

The realm of policy actors that affect the issue of local and regional food systems, as well as agriculture in general, is very diverse and often highly divisive. Additionally, this policy arena has evolved greatly over the past two to three decades as a variety of new interest groups and government players have become involved.

First, agriculture policy in the legislature is highly influenced by powerful agriculture committees in both the House and Senate. These committees were traditionally comprised of legislators from “big ag” states, those where commodity crop agriculture is a large part of the economy and for whom agriculture policy is a significant priority. Committee chairs can prevent legislation from making it out of committee to the House or Senate floors, and major legislation is typically written by committee chair staff members (M. Lott, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010).

Legislators from states where commodity production is a dominant industry are significantly affected by constituents’ perceptions of agriculture as well as principal business interests in the state, for example, agribusinesses that are often large employers. The current chair of the Senate agriculture committee is Blanche Lincoln from Arkansas, who is a staunch supporter of continued commodity payments free of significant reform. Lincoln is also the top recipient of contributions from the oil and gas industry from 2005 to the present and has received significant contributions from the American Farm Bureau, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, and Tyson Foods, in addition to having significant ties to agribusiness and biofuel interests (Center for Responsive Politics; Blumenthal 2010). The House agriculture committee chair is Collin Peterson, a conservative Democrat from Minnesota, an important corn producing state, whose top campaign contributors in 2009-10 were the American Farm Bureau and Monsanto (Center for Responsive Politics).

Historically, within committee membership, shared causal stories regarding the nature of agriculture and the prescriptions for policy, namely interventional price policies, have played a significant role in maintaining basic policy structure over time. As a consequence, incremental change has been the de facto method for shifts in farm bill legislation. This allows for peripheral reform, but potential reformers are strongly discouraged from taking aim at farm-price programs, which are seen as the heart of the agriculture policy domain (Browne 1995, pp. 56-61).

Due to these difficulties, senators from non-agriculture states have often viewed farm bill policy as outside of their scope of inquiry--their support for

farm bill legislation was often exchanged for a political favor or vote that was of higher priority in their state interests. For example, urban support of price subsidies was given in exchange for rural support of food stamps, both of which had minority support within Congress (Browne 1995, p. 26).

However, increased attention to local and organic food production, as well as gradual acknowledgment of the central role of agriculture in many important health, rural development, and environmental issues, has led to increased interest in agriculture policy among historically non-ag states. In addition, legislators from areas where more diverse, non-commodity crops are prevalent, such as the Northeast, are increasingly interested in how growing federal support for local food systems, organic production, small farms, and diversified crops can affect the interests of their constituents.

Several legislators from states with non-commodity, diversified farm economies currently on the agriculture committee, in particular Senators Gillibrand (NY) and Leahy (VT), bring different priorities to the legislative dialogue on agriculture, working to increase programs for conservation, small farmers, niche products, and markets, as well as to reform subsidy program loopholes and weaknesses that disproportionately benefit large enterprises. These senators are also working to integrate issues of nutrition and food security into federal agriculture policy. To bring significant change to future legislation, however, a more even-handed representation of the nation is needed. Jon Scholl, American Farmland Trust president, noted that the agriculture committee is still dominated by farm state legislators but predicted that this strong hold would weaken in the future due to more diverse groups engaging in the policy process (personal communication, Jan 12, 2010).

Commodity and agribusiness groups, such as the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and the National Cotton Council, have large amounts of funding to hire individuals and maintain offices in the D.C. political arena, allowing them to build relationships with congressional and agency policy makers and implementers. Other organizations, such as the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), a non-profit that is supported by agribusiness and food industry sources and generally promotes conservative political interests, also lobby through similar channels. The AFBF has the largest office of any agriculture-related interest group in Washington (F. Hoefner, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010). These interest groups have personal, political, and often financial ties to legislators in Congress and provide information and policy recommendations,

according to the interests of the individuals or companies that they represent. Production agriculture groups have the added advantage of longevity--their physical and political presence in D.C. is generally much more established than that of interest groups working for agriculture policy reform.

Due to the superior monetary resources and longevity of production agriculture and industry interests, NGOs advocating for policies to facilitate local and regional food systems face a significant competitive disadvantage. Often, such organizations merge the local food system issue with the related issue of sustainable agriculture, due to their complementary nature as well as organizational resource limitations.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) is the largest and most influential sustainable agriculture advocacy group in the federal policy arena at this time. NSAC, "a national alliance of family farm, food, conservation, rural and urban organizations that together take common positions on federal agriculture and food policies" (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition), demonstrates the strong coalition presence advocating for local and regional food systems. This organization was founded in the 1980s to promote sustainable agriculture, a goal that includes promotion of local and regional food systems as one strategy or aspect of sustainable agriculture. NSAC, as well as other allied organizations such as the Community Food Security Coalition, are highly participatory in nature, with multiple levels of interest aggregation. Their policy priorities and strategies at the federal level reflect the interests articulated by member farms and diverse local organizations at the community level (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition).

Due to the community-based nature of many smaller actors that are represented by DC-based NGOs, coalitions are a key policy tool for non-profit organizations working to promote local and regional food systems on the national policy level. This strategy allows aggregation of smaller, place-based interest groups such as specific small and mid-sized farms, local sustainable agriculture organizations, and food companies with a local and/or organic focus.

Nutrition, food security, and food justice interest groups have also allied with agriculture groups, with increasing recognition of the inequities associated with availability and affordability of nutritious, fresh food to low-income, urban, and/or minority individuals. The increasing spectrum of interest groups with a stake in the local and regional foods movement has increased the political strength and visibility of the movement in Washington, D.C., the primary location of lobbying at the federal level.

Local food NGOs use several tactics to address multiple levels of the policy process. First, they develop policy platforms that represent the interests of their membership. Second, they work with Congress to influence the process of writing legislation. Third, they work with the USDA in determining more specific program implementation. Finally, an instrumental strategy of such organizations is ensuring that policy changes achieved actually affect farmers and communities in positive ways; to this end, they provide outreach materials and support in utilizing government programs and funding sources (F. Hoefner, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010).

Influence of the groups in this process varies depending on the issue. For example, a policy advisor with NSAC observed that they and other related groups have significant impact on USDA programs related to sustainable agriculture but not on commodity-related programs. The latter draw the focus of agribusiness, commodity, and livestock groups and production agriculture groups, who have greater power and resources to influence these programs. As such, the short-term strategy of NGO groups working to promote sustainable agriculture and local food systems is expansion of grant programs that incentivize sustainable practices, market diversification, new farmers, and other newer (and significantly less funded) USDA programs (F. Hoefner, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010).

### **The Role of the USDA in the Policy Process**

Although legislative change has remained extremely incremental and hard wrought, other, more open, policy pathways have been utilized. Another key policy actor is the USDA, which is responsible for implementing agriculture legislation, most importantly the farm bill. While the USDA has little political influence in the legislative process, it is able to contribute opinions and expertise, and the complex nature of the farm bill allows the USDA some leeway in carrying out legislative intent. Since the Clinton administration, the USDA has gradually evolved to allow more innovation and inclusion of outside groups.

This shift became especially pronounced with the entry of the Obama administration in 2009, a change strongly felt in the makeup of USDA officials. Although supportive of sustainable and local agriculture, the president himself has not made substantial reform of agriculture a political priority, a challenge that would be extremely contested and politically costly (F. Hoefner, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010). However, Obama's appointment of many sustainable agriculture and local food system advocates has made sustainable

agriculture a priority in the department (J. Auburn, personal communication, Jan 14, 2010). This administrative support has allowed the USDA to play more of an advocate role in expanding programs for sustainable and local agriculture; however, it does not have the power to take on subsidy reform.

The most visible ally within the USDA for the local food movement is Kathleen Merrigan, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture. In 2009, Merrigan announced her "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" (KYF2) Initiative, which assembled a group of leaders from all USDA agencies to use existing agency resources delineated by their legislative mandate to promote local food systems. The initiative's mission is to "create new economic opportunities by better connecting consumers with local producers. It is also the start of a national conversation about the importance of understanding where your food comes from and how it gets to your plate" (Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food website). KYF2 is an example of how statutorily mandated programs can be utilized in new ways to facilitate creation of local food system connections and aid participants (L. Knowles, personal communication, Jan 8, 2010). The decentralized, complex nature of the USDA also results in lack of awareness and utilization of programs, especially by new and/or smaller farmers who could benefit greatly. The initiative thus seeks to promote various programs in a cohesive way, providing an outreach strategy to reach existing members of the local food movement and recruit new members.

KYF2 programs geared towards farm operations include loans targeted at small and disadvantaged farmers, value-added producer grants, education for beginning farmers and ranchers, technical assistance for farmers' markets, and rural cooperative development. Programs geared at rural communities in general facilitate technology transfer, aid in risk management, and provide grants for small businesses. Also included are conservation programs that provide monetary incentives for environmental quality improvements, land conservation easements, education on conservation practices, and organic production. Finally, programs to aid nutrition include money for community food projects and farmers' market promotion (including programs geared at seniors, women, and children). One especially important program is the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, which allows women receiving nutrition assistance through the WIC program to acquire produce from farmers' markets using special coupons or, increasingly, EBT (electronic benefit transfer) machines that allow electronic billing with the same card that participants use at supermarkets.

Another interesting USDA initiative, the Farmers' Market Consortium, is a diverse group that meets regularly to share program progress and strategies for promotion of farmers' markets. The consortium is composed of various USDA agencies as well as NGOs and a representative from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which sees farmers' market promotion as a key strategy to meeting its goals for improved nutrition, namely increased fruit and vegetable consumption. This collaboration between government agencies with program funding and NGOs that have established, on-the-ground connections to local communities is a key strategy to facilitate growth of local food networks.

Although certain USDA programs are extremely popular and well used (such as the Farmers' Market Promotion Program, which has to turn away applicants, despite receiving increased funding every year), many limitations restrict the extent of these new programs. Principal obstacles to the success of USDA projects that promote local food system creation are funding limits and lack of awareness (L. Knowles, personal communication, Jan 8, 2010). Despite increased monetary allocation to many such programs, the larger pool of funding is still limited by legislative mandate, and funding for these programs is dwarfed by spending on commodity payments (Witteman 2008).

Another major obstacle to the creation of local and regional food networks is lack of infrastructure at the appropriate scale. Local and regional producers need smaller processing and distributing facilities than those used by industrial, nationwide producers, facilities that have slowly disappeared due to the extreme consolidation of these operations. This problem is especially salient with regard to meat processing, because USDA sanitation restrictions prevent farms from processing on site in many instances. This lack of infrastructure impedes smaller farmers from getting their products to consumers or at least makes processing of their goods much more expensive. The USDA has acknowledged this obstacle and is working to develop portable processing facilities for chickens and cattle that would address this problem while complying with strict USDA sanitation regulations (L. Knowles, personal communication, Jan 8, 2010).

### **The 2008 Farm Bill**

Despite deeply rooted disparities in political influence between different parties of the policy issue, advocates of community food systems have been successful in publicly redefining the issue as one of not only environmental import but as having social, economic, and health repercussions as well.

The most recent farm bill, the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, continues the trend of incremental change while generally preserving the previous form of the bill, namely its large commodity programs. This farm bill provides somewhat increased funding for conservation, renewable energy, fruit and vegetable production, organic production, and research (Baker *et al.* 2008). For the 2008 bill, Congress consulted the USDA and NGOs regarding local food issues, and the bill for the first time allowed geographic preference for federal food procurement (J. Auburn, personal communication, Jan 14, 2010).

### **Farm to School: A Promising Policy Pathway**

Another significant opportunity for expansion of local food networks outside of the farm bill is the Farm to School Initiative, an issue that was especially salient at the beginning of this year with the annual Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act. This issue has also garnered more attention due to Mrs. Obama's public support of fresh food and local agriculture initiatives for child nutrition and school lunch reform, a show of support that included the planting of an organic vegetable garden at the White House. This year, bills were introduced in both the House and Senate by Senators Rush Holt (NJ) and Patrick Leahy (VT), respectively, which requested \$50 million in mandatory funding for farm-to-school programs over five years. This money would go to competitive grant and technical assistance programs to increase the use of local foods from small and medium-sized farms (National Farm to School Program).

In addition to this legislative action, 44 states already have operational Farm to School programs, with 2,111 Farm to School programs nationwide involving 8,944 schools (National Farm to School Program). The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 first introduced policies "encouraging" increased access to local foods in schools through farm-to-cafeteria activities and school gardens as well as requiring schools to implement a local wellness policy with a variety of local stakeholders (USDA Farm to School Initiative). A policymaker with the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) stated that one of their legislative priorities is a potential fresh food initiative currently being discussed on the Hill (M. Lott, personal communication, Jan 7, 2010).

### **Towards a Diverse, Healthy Food System**

Past government policies have encouraged the dominance of an industrial food and agricultural system that is at odds with health, social justice, and environmental responsibility. It is clear that alteration of commodity price supports, a major prop of this

industrial system, is a delicate task, and a wholesale termination of these programs, even if it were politically possible, would negatively impact many producers in a commodity market that has been significantly distorted by long-term surpluses and government intervention. However, policies that control production surpluses instead of encouraging them are a crucial first step.

In addition, proactive policies are also needed to encourage the growth of sustainable and socially beneficial food and agriculture systems. For example, instead of direct payments to farmers for producing several commodity crops, government programs could pay farmers to conserve their land, use sustainable practices, diversify crops, and make other land use choices that promote long-term public good, choices that are not currently encouraged by production payments or market forces. In addition, programs for rural development, small businesses, new farmers, and new markets should also become a government priority, as they would help foster innovation and economic success in rural areas now in decline. Such policy strategies take the holistic nature of food and agriculture systems into account, addressing the diverse social, economic, and environmental impacts of agricultural production.

Changes towards a more local food system have occurred all over the country independent of government aid and will undoubtedly continue to do so. However, programs such as these would help to reverse historical inequalities that impede creation of localized food markets and would further spur the grassroots, community-based change already taking place.

Despite the often divisive nature of agriculture policy, many of the policy makers interviewed for this article agreed that the issues cannot be framed as simply conventional versus organic agriculture, or even large versus small farms. The food system is and will continue to be a diverse entity, and at this point, many would agree that it is unrealistic to argue for the end of industrial food production as part of this system. What local food proponents seek is a level playing field for all types of producers and all types of food systems, as well as openness in the realm of agriculture and food production that allows members of society to be aware of the characteristics and repercussions of these different systems and decide for themselves what type of food system they support. A diversity of producers, with similarly diverse paradigms and strategies, is important to provide this freedom of choice and to ensure a secure, healthy, and responsible food system. One possible threat to industrial food production is potential future increases in the cost of fossil fuels—a fundamental system input—due to climate change

policies, inherent limits to fuel resources, or both. Such a change could drastically alter the logic of the economic equation that justifies the current industrial mode of food production.

Local and regional food systems involving more diverse actors, diverse crops and system inputs, and more place-based networks of market consumption provide an alternative to the industrial production that has come to dominate the U.S. food supply. This alternative is attractive to many individuals, both as consumers and as members of a larger society, and is consequently growing rapidly at the grassroots level. History has shown that current policies have not encouraged diversity in agriculture and perhaps have even helped to suppress it. Policy reformers thus call for an alteration of the agriculture policy domain that is inherently resistant to change, reform that would bring federal spending and policy more in line with society's expressed desires and interests. The process of policy change will undoubtedly remain an incremental one but will nonetheless progress as society continues to reimagine the possibilities for a future food system.

*Addendum: As of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011 both the Senate and House Agriculture committees have a new chair. These changes will undoubtedly influence policy decisions as the legislature works towards a new Farm Bill in 2012.*

Senator Debbie Stabenow, a Democrat from Michigan, has been chosen as the new chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. Michigan has the second most diverse agricultural production in the nation (California has the first), and as such, Stabenow's constituency is comprised of a significant number of small, diverse farmers that currently receive little federal support (Potts 2010). Stabenow's record shows her to be a moderate but also a reformist. She has often attempted to bridge the gap between commodity crop and vegetable and fruit production interests and has worked for increased support for small, rural producers and local marketing of crops as well as increased agricultural research funding (Bravender 2010; Potts 2010). Stabenow's past work gives hope to reformers that she will advance these efforts as chair, but she still must contend with a committee comprised largely of senators from "big ag" states that oppose significant changes to the farm bill (Potts 2010).

Representative Frank Lucas, a Republican from Oklahoma, will take over as chair of the House committee. Lucas supports continuation of direct

subsidy payments to farmers rather than other strategies such as revenue insurance programs, because he sees them as being the support strategy most compliant with the WTO agreements, and he believes they cause the least distortion of international market conditions (“Rep Frank Lucas” 2010). Representative Lucas has stated that he plans to hold oversight hearings regarding possible EPA overreaching in their environmental regulation of farms and will seek to write a “market-oriented, fiscally responsible farm bill” that will “produce the safest, most affordable, most abundant food, fiber, feed and fuel supply in the history of the world” (House Committee on Agriculture Press Release). From these statements, it seems likely that Lucas will seek to maintain the status quo regarding commodity support payments and perhaps limit the expansion of additional programs supporting diversified non-commodity crop farmers in an era of tightening federal budgets.

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Jon Scholl, President, American Farmland Trust.  
Meeting Date: Jan 12, 2010.

**Washington, D.C. Contacts:**

Jill Auburn, Chief of Agriculture Systems, USDA  
Research Education and Extension Office.  
Meeting Date: Jan 14, 2010.

Ferd Hoefner, Policy Director, National Sustainable  
Agriculture Coalition. Meeting Date: Jan 7,  
2010.

Luke Knowles, Coordinator of Know Your Farmer,  
Know Your Food. Meeting Date: Jan 8, 2011

Megan Lott, Policy Director, Community Food  
Security Coalition. Meeting Date: Jan 7, 2010.

**Additional Resources**

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Understanding-the-Farm-Bill-A-Citizens-Guide-to-a-Better-Food-System/145478625475216>

The National Agricultural Law Center,  
<http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org>  
Farm Bills, AgLaw Reporter, Publications

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