

# A Fair Farm Bill For All

Our current food system is not inevitable. Decades of misguided farm policy and unchecked corporate consolidation have wreaked havoc on family farmers, food workers, rural communities, and public health. However, a growing movement of farmers and consumers is working to rebuild local food systems and put more profit directly in the hands of farmers. But only structural changes at the federal level can create equity in our food system. The Farm Bill offers a critical opportunity to fundamentally transform federal farm and food policy. A fair Farm Bill would let the people who grow our food earn a decent living, practice environmental stewardship, and rebuild the infrastructure that consumers need to access sustainably grown, regionally produced food.

## What Is the Farm Bill?

The Farm Bill establishes the policies and government supports for a range of U.S. agricultural priorities. It is divided into sections (called titles) that cover specific program areas. The Farm Bill is reauthorized (rewritten and voted on by Congress) every five years.<sup>1</sup>

The 2018 Farm Bill had 12 titles. Historically, most Farm Bill spending — three-quarters in the 2018 bill — goes to the Nutrition title, which funds the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). There are also titles that offer credit to farmers, fund conservation programs, and encourage rural development, among many other programs.<sup>2</sup>

### 2018 Farm Bill Titles

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|-----------------------|---|
| I. Commodity Programs | VII. Research, Extension, and Related Matters |
| II. Conservation      | VIII. Forestry                                |
| III. Trade            | IX. Energy                                    |
| IV. Nutrition         | X. Horticulture                               |
| V. Credit             | XI. Crop Insurance                            |
| VI. Rural Development | XII. Miscellaneous                            |



The most politically contentious title is Commodities, which addresses the raw materials of our industrial food system — mainly corn, wheat, and soybeans, but also cotton and other major grain and oilseed crops. The Commodities title provides crop insurance and farm payments to protect farmers against declining revenue from price losses or weather events.<sup>3</sup> Critics across the political spectrum point to the Commodities title as a posterchild for government waste. Although the title incentivizes the overproduction of feed crops, simply eliminating farm payments and insurance programs is not a roadmap to a fair food system.

Instead of cutting the safety net for struggling farmers, we need to fix it to require organic regenerative practices and expand it to include more specialty crops. We also need to close loopholes that enable factory farms to capture conservation funding, and direct research funding to practices that help farmers adapt to a changing climate.

## A Fair Farm Bill in Four Steps

### Step 1: Fix the federal farm safety net

This includes reinstating supply management for commodities, a key part of the first Farm Bill.<sup>4</sup> Doing so would provide living wages for farmers while buffering both growers and consumers from price swings associated with boom-and-bust cycles. Previous supply management programs included:

- **Price floors** that establish minimum crop prices. These functioned as non-recourse loans to farmers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) — loans held on collateral, in this case the grain harvest. When the market price of corn or wheat falls below the established price floor, the USDA can collect the farmer’s harvest, essentially purchasing surplus grains rather than letting them flood the market;<sup>5</sup>
- A **federal grain reserve** for crops collected as collateral, which can be sold in years when weather events or other disruptions reduce national crop yields;<sup>6</sup> and
- **Voluntary acreage reductions** that pay farmers to set aside vulnerable land for a set time.<sup>7</sup>

Price floors and grain reserves can operate at virtually no budgetary cost to taxpayers.<sup>8</sup> We can reinstate supply management for grain crops and extend it to dairy — while also correcting past failures to include historically underserved farmers.<sup>9</sup>

We must also expand safety net coverage (like federal subsidized crop insurance) for more crops that directly feed people, including fruits and vegetables. This would aid farmers to shift to new production systems and diversify their operations. Additionally, farmers participating in safety net programs can be required to implement organic regenerative practices. This would provide a huge incentive for farmers to shift from ecologically depleting monocultures to ones that incorporate cover crops, crop rotation, and no-till farming.

## Step 2: Redirect public funding to support organic and regenerative agriculture

It is time to end the practice of public research for private gain, and to instead invest in building a food system that works for every farmer, food chain worker, and consumer. Farm Bill research funding should prioritize practices that reduce chemical inputs, build soil, and help farmers adapt



to climate chaos. Future Farm Bills should also boost financial and technical support to help farmers, especially historically underserved farmers, transition to USDA Organic certified operations.

Additionally, we need to close “conservation” loopholes that fund factory farms, and reject false solutions. This includes ending funding for factory farm practices, including building anaerobic digesters.

## Step 3: Increase competition within the agricultural sector

The 2008 Farm Bill included the first-ever livestock title intended to address the lack of competition in the livestock sector. The provisions included a requirement to implement mandatory country-of-origin labeling (MCOOL) for meat products. It also directed the USDA to develop new rules under the Packers and Stockyards Act (PSA) to ensure that livestock producers are treated fairly by meatpackers and poultry companies.<sup>10</sup> But Congress overturned MCOOL for meat in 2015, following threats from the World Trade Organization.<sup>11</sup> And as of December 2022, the USDA has yet to implement the long-awaited update to the PSA rules. This is thanks in part to years of obstruction by Congress; more recently, the Trump administration withdrew rules finalized under the Obama administration.

President Biden’s USDA has signaled its commitment to finalize a set of three rules to strengthen PSA enforcement. In the meantime, contract growers and farmers wait for protection from unfair and abusive practices by meatpackers and poultry processors.<sup>12</sup>

While we await much-needed Congressional reform to address MCOOL, the next Farm Bill should strengthen the “Product of USA” label to bar it from being used on meat raised outside of the country. Additionally, the Farm Bill should be expanded to include a stand-alone competition title that addresses consolidated market power across the entire food chain, including dairy, seed companies, fruit and vegetable buyers, and grocery retailers.

## Step 4: Invest in regional food hubs

Farmers need access to open, competitive markets to thrive. However, agribusiness consolidation has all but wiped out our nation’s smaller-scale slaughterhouses, grain mills, and mom-and-pop grocery stores.<sup>13</sup> It is hard to envision a food system that is free from highly consolidated supply chains.

Rebuilding our regional food infrastructure will not happen overnight; it requires public investment and political will. Farm Bill funding should invest in programs that connect

local farms to the grocery stores and restaurants where consumers spend their food dollars.<sup>14</sup> This includes increasing funding for regional food hubs that help smaller farms distribute and sell their products in new markets that would otherwise be difficult to enter.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

It is time to craft a Farm Bill for all. This includes reinstating tried-and-true supply management techniques that provide guaranteed living wages to farmers. We also need to redirect public funding to support farmers facing the

challenge of climate chaos while supporting organic regenerative practices.

Achieving these goals means fighting the corporate interests that want to maintain the status quo. We must hold our elected leaders accountable and push them to support Farm Bill policies that truly work in the interest of farmers and consumers. Only then can we rebuild a food system that achieves environmental stewardship, provides living wages to farmers and food workers, and ensures access to fresh and healthy food for all.

## Endnotes

- 1 Congressional Research Service (CRS). "2018 Farm Bill Primer: Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018." IF11126. March 2019 at 1.
- 2 *Ibid.* at 1 and 2.
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- 14 FWW analysis of USDA ERS. Food Expenditure Series. "Nominal food and alcohol expenditures, with taxes and tips, for all purchasers." Updated June 2, 2020.
- 15 Barham, James et al. USDA. Agricultural Marketing Service. "Regional Food Hub Resource Guide: Food Hub Impacts on Regional Food Systems, and the Resources Available to Support Their Growth and Development." April 2012 at 1.

