

# Agricultural policy is health policy



## Reforming the Farm Bill to improve public health

### HEALTHY FOOD IN HEALTH CARE » FACT SHEET

The Farm Bill presents an opportunity to prevent disease, compliment individual health interventions and improve the health of all people. The legislation can either promote the production of unhealthy beverages, processed foods, and cheap meat or support vibrant rural farm communities and greater access to healthy food to reduce diet-related disease. It is imperative that the health care community engage in agriculture policy discussions to ensure population and individual health remains a core focus.

#### Reasons to act

- The Farm Bill is not framed as a health bill, yet has significant impacts on health.
- The Farm Bill can support the production — and therefore the price — of healthful foods.
- Mitigating climate change is essential to farmer livelihood and food economies and should be prioritized as Congress writes the next Farm Bill.

### What is the Farm Bill?

Every five years, Congress reauthorizes the “Farm Bill,” a multi-faceted piece of legislation that plays a crucial role in domestic food production systems, resource conservation practices, energy and trade, rural community development, and nutrition services for low-income households.

America’s farm and food environment have changed enormously since 1933 when the Farm Bill was initiated in response to low farm prices resulting from overproduction and widespread rural and urban poverty. Today, food is more affordable and accessible than ever, however, the cheapest food is often of **poor nutritional quality** and therefore food-insecurity remains and obesity rates are at a record high. Farm bill legislation supports the industrial-

scale production of a few commodity crops such as corn that serve as feed for large-scale animal production and as a core ingredient in unhealthy, processed foods.

In addition, **industrial-scale food production** is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions causing instability for food production and accessibility. Despite its shortcomings, reforming the Farm Bill is a critical opportunity to improve our domestic food system and shift these trends.

While not framed as a public health bill, there are many ways in which Farm Bill policies can improve health by protecting natural resources, family-farmer livelihoods, rural communities and healthy food access for consumers.

Health Care Without Harm envisions a global food system comprised of a diverse network of local food systems that are transparent, health and wealth promoting, resilient, sustainable, fair, and economically just. The primary role of this food system is to conserve, protect, and regenerate the human and ecological systems that enable food production to support the needs of all eaters now and in future generations.

## Reforming the Farm Bill to promote health

The nutrition title of the Farm bill is two-thirds of the budget, supplying funds for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and provisions to reduce food costs for low-income individuals.

The remaining titles pertaining to food production are often overlooked for their impact on health. These titles are designed to preserve American agricultural production in what is now a fully globalized food system. Despite globalization, there is a renewed interest in supporting small- to mid-scale farms that produce a wider variety of foods in closer proximity to consumers, thereby reducing vulnerability associated with unforeseen weather events and associated food system instability.

However, policies that emphasize maximizing productivity, efficiencies of scale, and the desire to serve foreign markets have led to a concentration of ownership and intensive production of fewer crops than when the first Farm Bill was written. More of what we eat, including more than half of our fruits and vegetables, come from overseas and more domestic food products are destined for foreign countries, animal feed, or to produce energy.

The Farm Bill has never been viewed as a blueprint for the production of foods recommended for a healthy diet and therefore is disconnected from dietary recommendations. For instance, the **Dietary Guidelines for Americans** recommend that half of the plate be filled with fruits and vegetables, but only about two percent of U.S. farmland is used to grow fruits and vegetables, while **59 percent is devoted to commodity crops**.

This is an opportunity for health advocates to support policies that encourage a connection between agricultural production and nutrition recommendations centered around increasing sustainable domestic production of a variety of food products.

## Crop classification

The Farm Bill is not framed as a health bill, yet has significant impacts on health.

- Commodity crops: corn, wheat, soybeans, cotton and rice. These crops are grown in large quantities, easily traded and stored. Many serve as the foundation for the production of processed foods
- Specialty crops: fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture).

## Reforming supply policies for health promotion

The Farm Bill encourages a system that over-produces low-cost commodity crops that are a foundation for industrialized animal production and processed foods. Regular consumption of these foods is **associated with diet-related disease**.

By strengthening commodity crop insurance compliance requirements and improving specialty crops access to the insurance program, the Farm Bill has the power to reduce overproduction of commodity crops, preserve farmlands, enhance soil health and encourage increased diversification of domestically grown foods.

## Rebuilding regional food infrastructure

Programs within the Farm Bill should continue to focus on rebuilding regional food systems by addressing critical infrastructure challenges. Increasing the number of nearby canning facilities, meat processors, food distributors, and retail outlets through Farm Bill programs will create jobs, address rural poverty, improve farmers' livelihoods and the community's access to healthy foods. The bill also includes several rural development grants that help build broadband internet expansion, housing, lending, and water access programs that are essential to thriving communities and should be expanded.

“A healthy food system must thoughtfully place doctors, farmers, nutritionists, and others on the front lines of public and food system health as the key advisors and drivers of dietary and agricultural policy change.”

— STACIA CLINTON, RDN, HEALTH CARE WITHOUT HARM'S HEALTHY FOOD IN HEALTH CARE PROGRAM DIRECTOR

### Re-establish a robust public research program

Farmers use publicly funded and publicly available research to improve their efficiency, sustainability, food quality and many other factors that remain unknown to all but the large corporations that can self-fund their research. Funding for public research has remained largely unchanged since 1979. Independent, unbiased public research is necessary to advance the food production practices that place human and environmental health over profit.

### Improve effectiveness and reduce the costs of sustainable farming

The production of chemical-laden and conventionally produced foods have enormous consequences for the environment and health. Unfortunately, small, diversified farms using sustainable practices cannot compete economically with conventional production without assistance for startup costs or supply chain infrastructure that their conventional counterparts receive.

The next generation of farmers has acknowledged the true cost of unsustainable production by looking beyond the efficiency of the operation to how effective it is at nourishing and promoting the health of individuals and populations. With increased funding, Farm Bill programs can support new farmer ambitions to implement sustainable practices, or to transition a conventional farm into a modern, diverse, and ecologically-enriching food production ecosystem.

### Prioritize climate change throughout the Farm Bill

American farming is both a contributor to and at great risk from unprecedented weather patterns associated with climate change. Natural disasters have the ability to wipe out entire crops and impact community health as seen after the 2017 hurricanes in Puerto Rico.

In particular, conventional animal agriculture contributes 14.5 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and numerous public health concerns such as antibiotic resistance and pesticide exposure.

The next Farm Bill can prioritize the reduction of greenhouse gases by making Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) ineligible for federal assistance programs and instead invest that money into scale-appropriate small and midsize farms and ranches more reliant on regenerative agricultural practices such as multi-crop integrated grazing systems. Additionally, the bill

can incentivize diversified food production that ignites the natural function of soil to pull down atmospheric carbon.

There are several other Farm Bill programs that encourage better production methods.

Health Care Without Harm aligns with the efforts of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC), a network of producers, food supply chain entities who articulate a clear path toward **impactful policy changes** to Farm Bill programs.

### Taking Action

If the Farm Bill dialogue continues to be dominated by the agriculture industry, the “status quo” will continue, and the potential health improvements will not be realized.

The Farm Bill it is renewed every five years, and the fourth year is a critical time to present Congress with information they should consider as they approach renewal.

Your voice as a health professional is a valid perspective to bring to the debate and it is desperately needed in order to ensure our country’s agricultural policies take into account health at both the individual and population level.

The Health Care Without Harm network is a great resource to discover ways the health profession can effectively engage with federal food policy, including the 2018 Farm Bill. **Sign-up to receive updates.**



Health Care Without Harm seeks to transform health care worldwide so that it reduces its environmental footprint, becomes a community anchor for sustainability and a leader in the global movement for environmental health and justice.

This fact sheet was produced by Health Care Without Harm’s national **Healthy Food in Health Care program**, which harnesses the purchasing power and expertise of the health care sector to advance the development of a sustainable food system.

[www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org](http://www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org)

