

Do grain subsidies make Americans consume more calories?

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Christopher Shea [highlights a new study](#) that analyzes the effect of U.S. grain and soy subsidies on the American diet. [The study's abstract](#) leads with its contrarian, we're-taking-on-Michael-Pollan angle:

Many commentators have speculated that agricultural policies have contributed to increased obesity rates in the United States, yet such claims are often made without any analysis of the complex links between real-world farm commodity support programs, prices and consumption of foods, and caloric intake.

The researchers go on to argue that eliminating current subsidies--and thus the artificial cheapness of grain and grain-fed meat--would reduce overall caloric intake, but only slightly. And if the feds went farther and also eliminated tariffs on imported food, the cheaper sugar and dairy that resulted would more than counteract this effect. In short: current agricultural policy makes us consume fewer calories, not more, because the things the government props up are less calorie-dense than the things it restricts.

Hmm. That would make a lot of sense if we imported all or most of our sugar and dairy. But an excess in cheap corn has led the food industry to [pump everything full of high-fructose corn syrup](#), aka ridiculously cheap sugar. And if you make grain-fed meat more expensive, won't that apply to grain-fed dairy as well? American junk food is full of not just meat and refined flour but also sugar and cheese, and all of this is made cheap by grain subsidies.

Of course, I've long been persuaded by the argument that U.S. overproduction of grain and soy has serious negative consequences for public health (not to mention the environment, rural communities, [the livelihood of farmers in the developing world](#) and the abstract good of a free market).

So I don't want to write this study off based on my pre-existing opinions. (Especially not before I've read the rest of it, which I intend to do as soon as I can figure out how to log into Wiley.) But I'm skeptical.