

# Farm bill blues

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The U.S. is experiencing its worst drought in decades, and countless crops have been lost. Farmers with federal crop insurance can make up some of their losses; others don't have this option. While the farm bill reauthorization process has produced bills that include disaster relief, none has come close to becoming law. As for the current farm bill, it expires September 30, leaving its omnibus package of agricultural and food-assistance programs unfunded and uncertain—unless Congress reaches a deal first. And Congress is on recess until after Labor Day.

American farm policy badly needs an overhaul. Current policy focuses on propping up grain and soybean production on a massive scale, resulting in an artificially cheap abundance that is fed to livestock, dumped on foreign markets or converted into junk food and fuel. This comes at the expense of small farmers and local economies both at home and abroad. Its nutritional and environmental effects are devastating as well.

An ambitious reform agenda would instead subsidize fruits and vegetables, incentivize sustainability and lend a hand to smaller producers and new farmers. Advocates worked tirelessly to make the 2007 farm bill a vehicle for significant reform. By the time the bill was signed into law in 2008, they had been forced to settle for incremental change—and for the hope of accomplishing more when reauthorization came up again in 2012.

It wasn't to be. Last fall, the House and Senate agriculture committees met behind closed doors to hammer out an agreement. While this effort failed to produce a bill, it did prevent reform advocates from having much influence. In June, the Senate passed a bill containing little good news. Then the House committee passed an even worse bill. (The full House never voted on this measure, though it did pass a stand-alone bill of disaster relief spending—offset and then some by cuts to conservation programs.) By the August recess, reformers had been reduced to hoping that Congress passes any farm bill at all.

If it does, the bill won't be inspiring. It will preserve the agribusiness status quo while dialing back conservation efforts. It will cut food stamps, a crucial safety-net program (the fate of which is senselessly yoked with farm policy). If the House committee's language prevails, global food aid will be made less effective, while regulations on genetically modified seeds will be rendered toothless.

The alternatives, however, are worse. A short-term extension of some kind would keep the farm bill's programs alive past September, but it would leave farmers unprotected and uncertain and larger policy questions unresolved. The other option—doing nothing and letting the 2008 farm bill expire—would be chaotic and destructive.

The farm bill is enormous in scope. It represents a mess of irrational, unhelpful policy; it's also responsible for some essential programs. It needs to be reauthorized. Then it's back to the longer-term work of building a food system that does right by farmers, eaters and the land.