

Another year, another depressing farm bill debate

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

May 30, 2013

It's farm bill season again. That's right: time for our divided government to get together and reauthorize the five-year omnibus bill that affects everyone who grows, sells or eats food—or at least to go through the motions for a while before punting again like last year.

[The House and Senate committees have each passed a bill](#). Both bills cut spending, some of it the same and some of it different. Some of these cuts are good steps toward food reform, as they take aim at federal subsidies for farms that don't necessarily need the help.

But except where there's money to be saved, legislators are resistant to much change that comes at the expense of agribusiness power. Last week, the Senate voted on several amendments. For instance: Sen. Sanders proposed allowing—not requiring, *allowing*—states to mandate labeling of GMO food. Sanders caucuses with the majority, theoretically the party more likely to take the consumer's side against business interests. Still, [his amendment lost 71-27](#).

Of course, dollar for dollar the farm bill's really mostly about nutritional assistance programs, not food production and marketing. The House bill makes deep cuts to the food stamps program, which makes up [an ever larger share of what's left of the social safety net](#). The Senate bill—in another display of progressive fervor—cuts food stamps too, but *less*.

[The Senate shot down](#) Sen. Inhofe's amendment to convert the entire food stamps program into a block grant for the states to manage—conservative reformers' recent answer to everything—along with Sen. Roberts's attempt to septuple the cuts. So, there's that. But Sen. Gillibrand only got 26 votes in favor of restoring the program's full funding, so it's hard to imagine a scenario in which food stamps don't get cut. This [will make Americans hungry](#).

Then there's all the *other* hungry people in the world. Earlier this year, the president proposed a budget that included a major overhaul of foreign food aid: instead of

shipping U.S. food overseas, let's just send money. This is a really good idea, because sending food is slow and inefficient—and it often undermines local farmers and economies.

[Not gonna happen](#). American agribusiness likes being able to dump surpluses in impoverished countries, and lawmakers in both chambers and both parties like agribusiness money. Obama's controversial plan—aid that actually helps!—will have to wait.

Senators will consider more amendments when they return to Washington next week, including [a good one](#) that would up the funding a little for purchasing food aid from nearby sources. We're long overdue, however, for *large-scale* reform to our food system. But in Congress, a progressive win has been defined down basically to this: actually reauthorizing the farm bill, and without leaving *too* many food stamps recipients hungry.

At home and abroad, farmers and eaters deserve better.