
FARMER'S DIARY

WHY THE FARM BILL MATTERS TO YOU!

BY JOHN LEE



Here in the Northeast there simply are not a lot of farmers any more. Some would say that a lot of the farmers are farmers in quotes – dilettantes who dabble in agriculture for whatever reason suits them. Because of the scale of farms in our landscape (average of 85 acres per farm), ours are not terribly impressive when compared to the spreads we hear about in the Plains states, California or the Mississippi Valley. There, we are led to believe, farms are vast: thousands of heads of cattle, thousands of acres of wheat, corn or soybeans (as far as the eye can see). Cotton and peanuts spread across the south. America's heartland is feeding the world, so we are told. Though small IS beautiful, we have lacked clout in Washington for decades.

For those of you who like to eat and value diversity in your diet, it is not all milk, honey or high fructose corn syrup in America's agricultural economy. Agriculture (which provides most of the scenery we value) has some serious problems. An awful lot of the wooded scenery and open spaces we cherish, the Yankee rurality so vaunted by suburbanites, is, for the most part, maintained by farmers of one sort or another. Most of them are no longer young and probably do not have off-spring inspired to follow in the family's footsteps because of the amount of hard work farming entails and the poor prices their products bring. In fact, many farm families feel unappreciated in their communities.

Perhaps many non-agriculturists do not understand that as farms go out of business two things usually happen, either land is developed (which does not support itself on the taxes gen-

erated) or the land is conserved for various reasons by public or private entities. Conserved land comes off the tax-rolls and must be managed. It also has to be bought and paid for by somebody (either a foundation or public entity like your town or the State). While conservation is certainly the lesser of two evils, wouldn't active agriculture be vastly preferable?

Sadly, to be somewhat controversial, we in the Northeast, have a tendency to think of agriculture with a hint of Martha Stewart as the role model. This is not what we in successful agriculture are about. 'Model' farming may be lucrative for a few visionary souls but will not put food on enough tables. To be successful, in the material sense of the word, today's farmer must be able to produce and market his or her product in a fair and competitive environment to an appreciative (i.e 'educated') clientele. This must include school food services, and other institutions like senior centers which cater to the public.

Hence, the 2007 Farm Bill and why you should be interested. It is antithetical to the USDA's own Food Pyramid! For some \$90 billion dollars, the last 'farm bill' was essentially a feed and fiber support program. It brought you grains for feed, grains for calorie enrichment, oilseeds and cotton. What it did was support American 'big' farming at the expense of fair trade both overseas and here in America. How 'fair' was that? On the other hand, \$44 billion went to food stamp programs, nutrition programs and school lunches. You know how good the school lunch program is. So the farm lobby gets its support for the high fructose corn syrup market from urban liberals who

want to feed the hungry. It's all about nutrient density! Nutrient density (read 'higher fat content') is why we have an obesity problem in America.

In 2007, we have the right political and interest climate to change how the farm bill has been written in the past. Many interest groups are coalescing to address the concerns of feedlot farming, escalating health care costs and childhood obesity, water shortages, biofuel madness and dysfunctional rural infrastructures.

Food is not just for 'foodies'. We all need to eat and we all deserve a healthy diet. That diet and our food supply should not evolve from the boardrooms of the likes of ADM (Archer Daniels Midland) or university research operations looking for the next best use for corn syrup. We do need to feed the world, we do need to produce high quality, nutrient-rich foods that are affordable and we do need to keep our farmers in farming.

So, what is the highest priority? Clearly, keeping farmers farming is the essential ingredient in the equation. Without active agriculturists, your food will be made by agricultural chemists in a lab and will look like the quickie snack rack at 7-11 or Little Peach. Not a pretty picture. We need a farm bill that not only preserves farming as a viable economic opportunity for those already engaged but also creates viable economic opportunities for entry-level farmers who come to this country from other farming traditions. In the Boston area, these might be Hmong from central Laos, Vietnamese or Cambodian entrepreneurs or Latino immigrants who know more about the food habits and expectations of their compatriots than some of us who had farmer forebears.

Then there is the question of meal-miles. How far did your supper travel before it arrived at your table? This question, again, harkens back to the idea of keeping and encouraging a sound socio-political climate that keeps our local farmers on their land. Farmers' markets, CSA's and other farm to consumer venues certainly are far more preferable than encouraging agri-tourism (the economic version of Antietam for farmers). It is far more important to be growing and selling amazing corn than growing corn for a maze. There is marketing and there is 'prostitution'. Only the former should be the desired alternative.

From the local perspective, we consumers in the northeast would like to see a Farm Bill that supports local agriculture, preserves and insures economic opportunity and keeps our New England green. That does not sound like too much to ask from our esteemed legislators who are flushed with good will and bent on good intention.

The problem really arises from the fact that most farmers in America are not really farmers but entrepreneurs and businessmen who tend to focus on the bottom line and not on the exigent details of the economic journey of their product. The famous 60's line from Tom Lehrer ("Once it goes up, who cares where it comes down; that's not my department said Werner von Braun") applies to 'big' agriculture. Almost 50% of the price supports in the last farm bill went to 5% OF ELIGIBLE PRODUCERS most of whom are absentee landlords (i.e. corporations). Grow it and let someone else worry about what it

becomes and where it goes (and don't bother me with details about manure storage, either) is the mantra of agribusiness. Hence, corn, cotton, soybeans, beef, pork and poultry operations tend to get a lot of special attention at the expense of the consumer, the farm worker and the environment. Farm bills in the past have encouraged over-production, hence low dollar yield, an emphasis on finding new uses for the over-production and poor stewardship of our natural resources. All of these are dead-end streets for consumers.



Twinkies are not food nor are they, or their ilk, food innovations. They are junk and should be labeled as such. Our next farm bill should explicitly encourage the development and marketing of wholesome, nutrient-rich fresh foods which do not encourage the increasing scourge of diabetes in children and adults. The 2007 farm bill should establish 'green payments' to producers who manage their operations to conserve soil, minimize environmental degradation, manage waste and conserve resources. The next farm bill should consider penalizing over-production and rewarding innovative nutrition education programs which actually benefit both farmers and consumers. De-centralized farm ownership would improve ag-innovation and stimulate local economies dependant upon a vibrant entrepreneurial sector.

The 2007 Farm Bill should become the 2007 Food Bill because the real issue here that needs greater understanding is the importance of food per se. While few of us know a real farmer, more of us know something about real food. Food is one subject that everyone understands and is not the abstraction that 'farming' might be. While some may or may not be farmers and have a vested interest in Washington's idea of farming, all of us are consumers and what happens to the 2007 Farm Bill will effect the availability and quality of foods (real or ersatz) available at your 'comestible commodity (food) supply center' (which is what your supermarket will be called if you don't pay attention). ❖

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