

Growing Change

A Farm Bill Primer for Communities



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Law & policy innovation for the common good.

What is the Farm Bill?

The Farm Bill is a major piece of agriculture and nutrition legislation that has a profound impact on public health. It not only affects farming and food production; it also ultimately determines the types of food we eat and how much it costs.¹

Congress writes the Farm Bill with input from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), farmers, and other stakeholders every five to seven years. The most recent Farm Bill, approved in 2008, authorized more than \$600 billion in spending over 10 years.²

Stakeholders can play an important role in ensuring that those dollars are spent in ways that promote health by communicating to elected officials the links between local work and federal policy.

Which parts of the Farm Bill are important to nutrition?

The most recent Farm Bill is a vast piece of legislation: 663 pages, divided into 15 chapters³ (known as “titles”). Four titles are particularly relevant to the obesity-prevention community:

The **Nutrition** title authorizes funding and policy for eight nutrition assistance programs.⁴ The largest of these by far is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which represents roughly 64 percent of Farm Bill spending altogether.⁵ In 2010, the program served 40 million low-income people, or about 13 percent of the U.S. population.⁶ In addition to providing direct financial benefits to individuals, this title also promotes healthy eating initiatives by allocating funding for local food systems, fruits and vegetables in schools, and nutrition education.⁷

The **Horticulture and Organic Agriculture** title funds programs that support farmers’ markets and the production of fruits and vegetables (regardless of whether the crops are produced organically or conventionally). This title also provides funding and rules for organic production, food safety education, and plant pest management.⁸

The **Commodity Programs** title establishes subsidies for 21 commodity crops, including corn, soybeans, wheat, grain sorghum, barley, oat, and rice.⁹ There are a few different types of subsidies, but in general, subsidies are some form of financial support for farmers who grow certain crops. Notably, fruit and vegetable producers do not receive these subsidies.

When the Farm Bill is reauthorized every few years, it gets a new name. Here are the names of the last three Farm Bills:

2008: Food, Conservation, and Energy Act

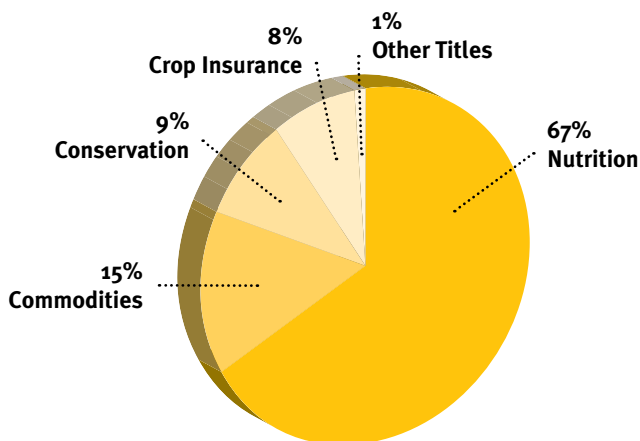
2002: Farm Security and Rural Investment Act

1996: Federal Agriculture Improvement Act



The **Research and Related Matters** title funds exploration into areas such as agricultural production techniques and wilderness management. Funding for research into meat, dairy, grain, and oilseed production exceeds funding for fruit and vegetable production research by 3 to 1.¹⁰ Recently funded projects include a new packaging technique for hot dogs, an investigation of bacteria that cause food-borne illnesses in chicken processing, and research on plant grafting to improve organic vegetable production.¹¹ The Farm Bill could potentially direct more of these funds to nutrition, obesity-prevention, and fruit and vegetable production research.

2008 Farm Bill Title



Estimated five-year cost of the 2008 Farm Bill, according to the Congressional Budget Office

Why is the Farm Bill important?

Local and state stakeholders should pay attention to the Farm Bill reauthorization process for two reasons. First, the Farm Bill sets policy that affects food production, from farm to fork. For example, policies set by this legislation determine, to some extent, the mix of crops that are grown in the United States, which can affect the price and availability of food.¹² If stakeholders want to alter the balance of crops, the Farm Bill can be a vehicle for change.

Second, the Farm Bill commits billions of federal dollars to support a wide range of local activities, including food assistance for low-income people, grants and incentives for agriculture-related economic development, and research into food access (for instance, the 2008 Farm Bill authorized a study of food deserts in the United States*).¹³

* The USDA produced a report for Congress that identified and analyzed areas of the country that have limited access to healthy, affordable food. It also made recommendations for how to improve access to food in these areas. The report is available here: www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/AP/AP036/AP036fm.pdf.



What are the key areas?

The Farm Bill is a vast piece of legislation covering a range of policy areas. For local stakeholders, three broad issue areas will be of key interest: food security and nutrition, local/regional food systems and economic development, and the health of the food supply.

The Farm Bill improves food security and nutrition for millions of low-income Americans.

The largest Farm Bill program in terms of spending (and, arguably, impact) is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program).¹⁴ In 2010, SNAP provided more than 40 million low-income Americans with a total of \$65 billion for food purchases.¹⁵ In addition to providing food security, SNAP spending has a substantial impact on the economy: every \$5 of SNAP benefits spent generates \$9 of economic activity. A \$1 billion increase in SNAP funding can produce up to nearly 18,000 jobs in urban and rural areas.¹⁶ Despite its impact on people and communities, SNAP funding is frequently threatened in Farm Bill spending discussions because it makes up such a large part of the budget.

The Farm Bill supports other, smaller nutrition programs that make up the food safety net in the United States. The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) provides agricultural products, like dried beans and canned fruits and vegetables, to states, which redistribute the foods directly to low-income households or to food banks and other food distribution organizations.¹⁷ The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program provides states with funds to purchase fresh fruit and vegetable snacks for children attending select low-income schools.¹⁸

The Farm Bill supports local and regional food systems and economic development.

The Farm Bill supports American agriculture and rural communities, both of which have suffered over the past century. Agriculture employed 41 percent of the U.S. workforce at the beginning of the 20th century; it now employs less than 1 percent of the workforce.¹⁹ This decline is attributed largely to increased efficiency, the mechanization of production and the globalization of agricultural markets.²⁰ Ninety percent of family farmers make very little money from farming and rely almost exclusively on off-farm income to make ends meet.²¹

Since fewer people rely on farming for income, rural communities need new ways to provide economic opportunity for residents. The Farm Bill includes programs that support not only food production but also processing and distribution. Rural communities can harness these programs to create local and regional food processing and distribution industries that will provide off-farm jobs and support more local food production.

The Farm Bill includes several programs that support local and regional food systems at various points in the chain. For example:

- **Systemwide:** The Community Food Projects (CFP) competitive grant program provides small grants to nonprofits working to improve community food security, from consumption to production. For example, Savannah, Ga., used a CFP grant to provide vouchers for a farmers' market, to organize cooking classes, and to teach residents how to grow their own food.²²

- **Production:** The Rural Business & Industry Loan Program provides federally guaranteed loans to support the operation or expansion of rural businesses, such as food processing facilities, hospitals, and restaurants.²³ The 2008 Farm Bill required that 5 percent of the program funding be reserved for loans that support the production of local or regional food.²⁴

- **Retail:** The Farmers Market Promotion Program provides grants to expand farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, farmstands, and other direct-to-consumer outlets for farm products.²⁵

- **Consumption:** SNAP benefits can be redeemed at farmers' markets, if markets have the technology and are authorized by the USDA to accept the benefits.²⁶

The Farm Bill establishes policies that determine how healthy our food supply is.

Farm Bill policies have an impact on which foods are available in our communities: at grocery stores, schools, farmers' markets, and any other place where we find food.

The Farm Bill authorizes subsidies of commodity crops, such as corn and soybeans. Fruit and vegetable production is not eligible for these subsidy programs. Agricultural policy experts generally believe that the commodity subsidy programs create barriers to fruit and vegetable production, although it's not clear how much of a barrier these programs are. Limited availability of crop insurance for fruits and vegetables may also affect production levels.²⁸

Farm to School: A Farm Bill program?

Many schools buy food from local farmers and participate in other farm-to-school activities, but federal farm-to-school efforts are not funded through the Farm Bill.

The Farm Bill did, however, establish a policy in 2008 allowing schools to use "geographic preference" for procuring school foods with federal child nutrition money. This new rule makes it easier for schools to purchase locally produced foods for meal and snack programs.²⁷



Commodity subsidies have been a hot button issue for the public health and food policy communities lately because commodities are major ingredients of junk foods. Commodity subsidies are just one way that federal agriculture policy affects food prices and availability. As these stakeholders engage in Farm Bill discussions, they should learn more about how other aspects of the legislation, such as agriculture research investments, affect nutrition. For a discussion of commodity subsidies and their impact on the food supply, written for public health professionals, see *Do Farm Subsidies Cause Obesity*, available at www.foodandwaterwatch.org/reports/do-farm-subsidies-cause-obesity.

Farm Bill programs also determine which foods are available to people accessing food assistance programs and eating in government institutions, like schools. For example, SNAP program regulations define the foods and beverages that can be purchased. SNAP benefits can be used for most foods and nonalcoholic beverages; they can also be used for food seeds and plants.²⁹

Another program, known as Section 32, allocates 30 percent of annual customs revenue to support American agriculture, which has usually been done through purchases of food crops. Food purchased with Section 32 money is given to schools for meals and food providers for low-income people (e.g., food banks). The 2008 Farm Bill included requirements for the share of Section 32 dollars that must be spent on fruits and vegetables.³⁰ It's important to note, though, that most school meal funding and regulations are in the Child Nutrition Act, not the Farm Bill.

How can people learn more and engage in Farm Bill discussions?

Local stakeholders may want to participate in Farm Bill discussions to ensure that federal food policy supports access to healthy and affordable food for all.

- **Research the Farm Bill provisions of interest to your community.** The USDA and many national organizations have published in-depth Farm Bill primers (see “Learn More” at the end of this fact sheet).
- **Sign up for federal policy e-mail updates from national public health and agriculture groups.** These e-mails can help you understand the current status of the Farm Bill and what issues are being discussed. Organizations such as the American Public Health Association and the Community Food Security Coalition have federal policy e-mail lists that are open to members.
- **Participate in a listening session, or host one of your own.** Congressional agriculture committees, the USDA, and food policy organizations host listening sessions about the Farm Bill. These sessions are generally open to the public and provide a forum for community members to talk about Farm Bill issues and share their perspectives with policymakers.
- **Share local success stories with Congresspeople.** If your community has a successful food policy or program that provides people with healthy food and supports local farmers, share your stories. These ideas can provide support for existing and future Farm Bill programs.
- **Craft your community’s Farm Bill vision.** Organize town hall meetings to develop your community’s shared vision for a Farm Bill that supports healthy, local food systems. Some communities, such as Seattle, have passed local resolutions that articulate their shared vision for a healthy Farm Bill.



What can be done after Congress passes the Farm Bill?

Congress writes and passes the Farm Bill, usually after months of debate and negotiation, and then the President will sign it into law. But work on the Farm Bill doesn't end with the President's signature. The USDA and other agencies need to implement the law—which includes starting up new programs, modifying existing programs, writing regulations, and releasing grants.

Stakeholders can monitor federal policy activity and provide input to federal programs, most commonly by writing letters to the USDA. In many cases, the USDA will ask for public input on proposed regulations and program design; these requests are published in the Federal Register (www.gpoaccess.gov/fr). Even if the USDA does not ask for public input, stakeholders can write to USDA officials to express support or concern over how the Farm Bill is being implemented.



It would be impossible to track all Farm Bill implementation activities. Instead:

- Choose one or two programs and policies of interest to track
- Monitor the USDA website for updates on those programs and policies
- Sign up for USDA and national nonprofit organization e-mails about Farm Bill implementation
- Look for requests for public comment on programs and policies of interest (these will often be publicized by national nonprofits and the USDA; you can also set up alerts on the Federal Register website)



Learn More

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. 2008 Farm Bill Side-by-Side.

This web site provides a title-by-title synopsis of provisions in the 2008 Farm Bill. It also compares 2008 provisions with previous food and farm legislation.

www.ers.usda.gov/FarmBill/2008/

Farmers' Legal Action Group. *Planting the Seeds for Public Health: How the Farm Bill Can Help Farmers Produce and Distribute Healthy Foods*. August 2010.

This analysis looks at opportunities to increase production of and access to healthy food through the Farm Bill. It also provides background on longstanding provisions in the Farm Bill.

www.flaginc.org/topics/pubs/farbill.php

Congressional Research Service. *What Is the Farm Bill?* December 2010.

This report provides a high-level overview of the budget and policy of the Farm Bill, with some historical perspective.

www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/crs/RS22131.pdf

National Farmers Union. Farm Bill 2012 information.

This website discusses the National Farmers Union policy agenda for the 2012 Farm Bill. NFU is an advocacy group that represents the interests of family farmers and rural communities.

www.nfu.org/legislation/family-farm-policy/2012-farm-bill

American Farm Bureau. Legislative Priorities for the 112th Congress, 1st Session.

This website discusses the American Farm Bureau (AFB) policy agenda for the 2012 Farm Bill. AFB is another national advocacy group that represents the interests of farmers and rural communities.

www.fb.org/index.php?action=issues.home

Food Systems and Public Health Work Team. *Mapping a Sustainable Agriculture & Public Health Alliance for the 2012 Farm Bill*. 2011.

This white paper presents the common policy goals of the public health and sustainable agriculture communities.

www.healthyeatingresearch.org/images/stories/meetings/2011_0511_Mapping_Sust_Ag_and_Public_Health.pdf

American Enterprise Institute. American Boondoggle: Fixing the 2012 Farm Bill.

This analysis presents a free enterprise perspective on Farm Bill policy. It also presents a counterpoint on nutrition policies and programs to public health perspectives on these issues.

www.aei.org/files/2011/11/03/-americanboondoggle_174848782104.pdf

The 2008 Farm Bill included several victories for public health, the result of intense work in the months and even years leading up to the reauthorization.

A few examples:

- **Farmers' Market Promotion Program:** \$33 million over five years to help promote and expand farmers' markets³¹
- **Community Food Projects:** \$25 million over five years toward competitive grants for local food projects that improve food security in low-income communities³²
- **Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program:** \$500 million over five years to provide fresh fruit and vegetable snacks to children in low-income public schools³³
- **Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program:** \$105 million over five years to provide farmers' market vouchers to low-income seniors for fruits and vegetables³⁴
- **Whole Grain Pilot Project:** \$4 million for a pilot project to incorporate whole grains into school meals and to evaluate whether children's consumption of whole grains goes up as a result³⁵



Endnotes

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