

The Beet

By Mary Niefenfuier

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“Few pieces of legislation have as profound an impact on public health as the Farm Bill.” – Michael Pollan

Never has there been a better time in this country to celebrate the simple virtues of farmers’ markets. In this high-tech fast-food age of imported, chemical-laden, artificially-flavored, genetically-altered, and highly-processed foods—fresh, locally-grown products from small-scale farms are, indeed, cause for celebration.

Next week is National Farmers’ Market Week. We hope you plan to come to the market on Friday, August 10 to celebrate with us.

An important issue currently before Congress is the 2007 Farm Bill. It is extremely complex and bloated legislation that, unfortunately, affects every one of us—not only growers of subsidized crops.

Over 21 billion dollars in federal farm subsidies were paid last year, most of it to farmers who grow only five crops: corn, soybeans, cotton, wheat and rice. The largest farms get the largest payments. The size of these subsidies has encouraged the growth of giant agribusinesses and furthered the demise of small family farms. According to Michael Pollan, journalist and food industry expert, the farm bill encourages farmers to grow as much corn and soybeans as they can, and then sell them cheaper than they cost to produce. Pollan describes a broken American food system in which a nation’s epidemic of obesity and diabetes is traceable to cheap, unhealthy calories generated by the farm bill. It is legislation that encourages farmers to over-produce grain crops (we don’t subsidize fruits and vegetables), leading to a glut of cheap calories in the form of corn sweeteners for our soda and soybean oils for our fried foods.

The farm bill dates to the 1930s and was intended as a temporary aid for small farmers affected by the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. It comes up for renewal every five years. However, these days, instead of the small family farm, it’s agribusiness that benefits the most, getting up to 40 percent of gross revenues directly from the government. Economists say they can find no rationale for federal handouts that subsidize a few crops, or for farmers who make millions of dollars each year.

Subsidizing corn, in particular, is hard to justify. Because of the ethanol boom, corn prices are at near record levels, resulting in a web of implications beyond our borders and including our borders. Dumping our cheap corn onto the agricultural market in Mexico, for example, and selling it below the cost of production (which subsidies allow our farmers to do), has caused millions of Mexican farmers and agricultural workers to lose their jobs under NAFTA. Many have been forced off the land and have headed north. “All these things are connected,” says Michael Pollan, “If we export too many cheap agricultural commodities, we’re going to reap...global poverty and more immigration.”

Critics of the farm bill have been hoping that, with Democrats now in control of Congress, there will be major reforms to this year’s bill. Minnesota’s own Collin Peterson, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, came up with a plan to eliminate subsidies to any farmer who makes more than \$1 million per year. But his proposal would block subsidies for only about 3,100 of the 1.5 million recipients. Environmentalists, who feel subsidized crops put a huge strain on the land, were hoping there would be more money in the bill to pay farmers to

protect soil, wildlife habitat and wetlands. Imagine their disappointment when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi endorsed a farm bill that provides less for conservation than the amount proposed by the Bush Administration!

There's obviously a great deal left to debate. The Senate takes up the farm bill later this year. In the meanwhile, I'll continue to enjoy the fruits of local labor by supporting the farmers' market and hoping for the best in the new bill. Join us on August 10 from 3 to 6:30 pm as we celebrate with live music, a canning demonstration, food, exhibits and children's activities.

See you at the market!

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