

# Better Food Starts with the Farm Bill

Fact Sheet • June 2010

Our current food system is broken, and it didn't happen by accident. Many people don't have access to safe, nutritious, affordable food; farmers can't make a living; many regions of the country can no longer produce the food they consume; and large-scale industrial agriculture pollutes our soil and water. Decades of bad food policy designed for agribusinesses and mega-farms, combined with unchecked corporate mergers, have wreaked havoc on family farmers, public health and rural communities.

Independent farm families have been sold out by an agriculture policy that favors the overproduction of low-cost commodity crops like corn and soybeans. Deregulation has left farmers vulnerable to wild swings in the price of corn, soybeans and wheat, lowering farmers' earnings for most of the last 15 years. Meanwhile, agribusiness buyers — grain traders, factory farms controlled by meat companies and processed food manufacturers — reap huge benefits and profits from this system of cheap commodity crops.

Midsized farms are at the mercy of market fluctuations, and a wave of agribusiness, food manufacturing and supermarket mega-mergers have made the problem worse. Consolidation has allowed a tiny handful of companies that buy crops and livestock to dictate the prices that farmers receive. More than 85 percent of beef cattle are slaughtered by just four firms, only two companies sell half the corn seed and one company controls almost 40 percent of the U.S. fluid milk supply. More than half of grocery store retail earnings go to just five firms — who own all the old regional grocery store chains — ensuring that the low prices paid to farmers are not passed on to consumers at the grocery store.

We can't just shop our way out of this problem. While we work to restore links in our local food systems that bring farms and consumers together, we must fix our broken food policy at the federal level. Our next Farm Bill should ensure functional, fair markets for farmers and rebuild the infrastructure we need to restore regional food systems.

## Blueprint for a Healthy Food System:

1. Fair markets: There need to be enough buyers for crops and livestock to give producers a fighting chance to receive a fair price.
2. Sustainable livestock: Independent, family-scale livestock operations producing meat and milk in responsible ways should replace industrial livestock operations that use antibiotics and hormones to boost production, produce excessive amounts of waste and force animals to behave in unnatural ways.
3. Diversity: We need more than one kind of farmer raising more than one kind of crop or animal, and oppor-



tunities for beginning and minority farmers to thrive in agriculture.

4. **Regional and seasonal markets:** Every region of America used to produce nearly every kind of crop and animal that people eat. Our food policy should encourage farmers to grow and consumers to eat crops suitable to their region, season and climate, while supplementing their winter pantry with produce from warmer parts of the United States, or with imports from places with adequate safety, labor and environmental rules.
5. **Safe workplaces and fair wages:** The food system needs to be fair to everyone that labors to bring food from the farm to the fork.

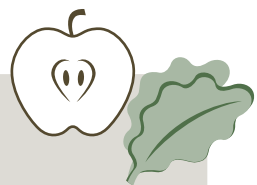
We have an important opportunity to make our food system work for our farmers, our health and our communities. The Farm Bill controls how food reaches all of our plates: how it's grown, processed and distributed, and who has access to healthy food. The Farm Bill is up for reauthorization in 2012, and if we can implement the following changes, we can create a healthy food system for everyone.

### Action for a Fair Farm Bill:

1. **Level the playing field:** A more vibrant marketplace with more choices for farmers and consumers cannot happen without breaking up the agribusiness monopolies.
2. **Make markets fair:** Farm pricing and contract policies should ensure that all producers receive enough from their farm sales or services to provide a fair return.
3. **Ensure food security:** Restoring common-sense practices like agricultural reserves can reduce wild volatility in prices paid to farmers and reduce long-term high prices that harm consumers. America used to have a commodity reserve for grains — like the strategic petroleum reserve — and it's time to restore it.
4. **Make healthy food accessible:** In the short term, nutrition safety nets need to be strengthened so low-income families can afford healthy, nutritious foods, not just the cheapest options. Over the long term, families need the opportunity to earn a decent living so that every family has access to healthy foods they can afford and find in their neighborhoods.
5. **Rebuild local infrastructure:** Consolidation in the food system has eliminated local butchers, dairies, produce wholesale marketplaces and grain-milling operations needed to restore regional food systems and strengthen rural economies.
6. **Make smart government purchases:** Schools, universities, hospitals, government agencies, prisons and governments at all levels should use their purchasing power to lead the way in recreating regional food systems.
7. **Support sustainable farming:** Farmers cannot just switch from intensive commodity production to more sustainable, diverse farms overnight. For independent farmers to shift to more diversified operations they will need credit, agricultural extension, organic transition and other capacity-building support.
8. **Promote environmental stewardship:** Government conservation programs should promote farm management strategies that improve biodiversity, minimize air and water pollution, and conserve soil, water, and other essential resources.



We can achieve a healthy food system if enough people demand change in the next Farm Bill. Take action by signing the Petition for a Fair Farm Bill at [www.foodandwaterwatch.org/fairfarmbill](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/fairfarmbill)



#### For more information:

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