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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Amber Fields of BlandBy [DAN BARBER](#)

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THERE'S invariably something risky, if not risible, about allowing Congress to decide what's for dinner. Bad decisions about agriculture have defined government policy for the last century; 70 percent of our nation's farms have been lost to bankruptcy or consolidation, creating an agricultural economy that looks more Wall Street than Main Street.

Now, after the uprooting of a thousand years of agrarian wisdom, we chefs have discovered something really terrible — no, not that the agricultural system we help support hurts farmers and devastates farming communities, or that it harms the environment and our health. What we've discovered is that the food it produces just doesn't taste very good.

Who's responsible for the blandness? Look no further than Washington: There you will meet not farmers, but the people determining how our farmers farm. They do it through the farm bill, a mammoth piece of legislation that designates American agricultural policy every five years and that Congress is preparing to take up in its new session.

This is a sweeping bill, omnibus in every sense — nutrition, conservation, genetic engineering, food safety, school lunch programs, water quality, organic farming and much more. It's really a food and farm bill. If you're a chef or a home cook or someone who just likes to eat, it affects you, because it determines what you eat and how what you eat is grown.

And the food that we grow on 200 million acres of harvested cropland is inedible. Stand in the middle of our farm belt and you'll see cornfields extending to the horizon, but the harvest won't be dinner, not until it's milled and processed into flours or starches, or used to fatten our animals on feedlots. Just four crops — corn, rice, soybeans and wheat — account for the vast majority of our harvested acreage. Not surprising, given that these same crops account for 70 percent of the total subsidies allotted to farmers.

No one wants farmers to suffer, especially chefs. But if we're spending \$20 billion or so a year on farm subsidies, we ought to invest in the foods we eat. And I mean eat, not process into something that resembles food. That means fewer subsidies for grains like corn and soy, and more help for growers of broccoli and tomatoes.

How do we do this? We could start by rewarding diversity over yield, basing subsidy payments not on how many acres of corn a farmer grows but on the number of varieties of crops he plants. We could also link payments to, say, the efficiency of nitrogen fixation (crop rotation helps the soil retain nitrogen, so farmers don't need to add it with chemicals) or equate them with how much a farm helps soil and water conservation. In effect, tie payments to plant health.

This doesn't mean the government needs to tell the farmer what to grow. Instead, show the farmer that there's more money to be made in a rich, diverse ecology and the planting strategy will change. Change the planting strategy, and whether it's grains or greens, the quality of what's harvested vastly improves.

Yes, the naughty thumb of science may have prodded the earth, as E. E. Cummings said, but there's nothing wrong with thumbing

dollar bills in the direction of promoting a tastier food supply. That's the kind of green revolution that a chef can support.

But such thoughts are rarely on the minds of our legislators, or, so it seems, anyone else. Take as an example the insurance industry. Its policies favor big farms that grow a single commodity crop. If you're a farmer who wants to grow lots of different crops, it's almost impossible to get affordable coverage; to insurers, you're pretty much the equivalent of a skydiving cigarette smoker.

The insurance regulations that are part of the farm bill need to address this disparity, because crop diversification should be exactly what insurers want: it helps to prevent the kind of natural disasters that insurance policies protect against, say, a devastating insect infestation. (Of course, it gives food lovers precisely what they want: more diversity, more variety, more flavor.) To this end, our agricultural policy should acknowledge the role of biodiverse farms in risk management by establishing discounts for farmers who practice this form of environmental stewardship and removing the discriminatory 5 percent premium surcharge on policies that encumbers organic producers under the current system.

While our legislators are at it, they might also look at another powerful paradox that chefs confront every day. If I want to purchase a case of carrots, it's much easier (and cheaper) to get them from the Salinas Valley, in California, than from the Hudson Valley that surrounds my restaurants. The food distribution system favors size. A distributor in California can send one truck to pick up 50 cases of carrots; a distributor procuring exclusively from the Northeast will need to send 50 trucks to 50 different farms.

That's a shame, not just because a carrot that comes to New York from California gets singed with petroleum as it travels cross-country, but because at this time of year carrots pulled from the rich muck dirt of Western New York have 50 times more flavor than their West Coast counterparts.

Same with milk, which large industrial dairy farms sell with the iconic label of a smiling, muscle-flexed cow in front of open pasture and next to an old red barn. That's tantamount to false advertising, since the industrial dairy cow never sees a blade of fresh grass and has very few muscles to flex after receiving hormones to increase productivity. With 20,000 cows per farm, the animals spend a lot of time waiting in line for the next milking, so it's hard to imagine that there is a lot of smiling going on.

False representation aside, there's one point the powerful dairy industry won't let us forget: milk is pretty cheap. But the real cost of milk is hidden in places like California, with its heavily subsidized irrigation system; if Western dairy farmers had to pay the real cost of the irrigation-dependent alfalfa fed to cows, New England's milk prices would be more competitive. And if those cows ate a variety of grasses as they were meant to, instead of just alfalfa, "Got Milk?" would be more "Got Rich, Delicious and Affordable Milk?"

Though food transportation and irrigation subsidies exist outside the domain of the current farm bill, their implications cannot be overlooked as we review (and revise) our system of agriculture. The new bill needs to level the playing field by recognizing a region's agricultural strength — like New England's abundant supply of great grassland — and encouraging farmers through subsidies and other inducements to use it accordingly.

Then there's the question of meat and poultry. A breed of pig that tasted like pork (something other than the other white meat)? A chicken that actually saw pasture (and tasted like ... chicken)? A steer with fat marbled on a grass diet, or a lamb that's been rotationally grazed? We're not asking for a lot, but no matter, it's not for sale, at least not by the big-food chain.

Unless you're a farmers' market devotee or savvy Internet user, or happen to live near a market that supports good animal

husbandry, you depend on a system that raises animals in confinement. That's very large confinement — several thousand pigs to a barn, tens of thousands of chickens. The industrial model is efficiency through uniformity. A tastier model would be flavor through diversity — but the current farm bill won't allow it.

For one thing, federal rules prohibit the out-of-state sale of livestock and poultry products inspected by a state agency, which means if you want to raise more meat and expand your farm by offering a niche product, you're stuck doing it only in your state — if you can find a slaughterhouse. (Oh, federally inspected slaughterhouses are few and far between, and unless you're an agribusiness giant, nearly impossible get into.)

Local abattoirs, besides feeling the pressure of land prices and unwelcoming neighbors, have to contend with unwieldy rules. A one-size-fits-all mentality dictates that mom-and-pop slaughterhouses must follow the same rules of inspection as industrial plants, even though these huge meat processors typically slaughter more cattle in a single hour (390 by Agriculture Department estimates) than their counterparts might see in a whole year.

Legislation to approve state-inspected meats was introduced in the last session by Representative Roy Blunt of Missouri. His bill calls for the Agriculture Department to certify all satisfactory state-inspection programs, thus enabling the 2,000 existing state-inspected meat processors to enter the national market, and paving the way for many more.

His bill would help, but so would a farm bill that put up fewer roadblocks to smaller-scale livestock farms and pulled the veil back on where our food comes from. We stamp "Made in the U.S.A." on blue jeans and cars — but Americans can't find out where their food was grown. If Congress passes — and enforces — a rule in the 2007 bill requiring country of origin labeling, we'd be more informed about the origins of our food supply and, to the great fear of our corporate brethren, we might ask a lot more questions. Questions like "Who's growing our food?" and "How's it being grown?" are not easily answered anymore, especially when a package of frozen ground meat can have animal parts from as many as 20 countries.

Suggest to agribusiness interests that they think about flavor, though, and you're likely to be called an indulgent elitist who wants to force Americans to pay more for their food and an anti-progressive nostalgic for a bygone era of family farms.

I SUPPOSE, as a chef, I'm guilty of being indulgent, but nothing like the over-indulgence of the farm bill. The meat we end up buying at the local farmers' market is relatively expensive because, through the workings of agricultural legislation, conventional meat prices are unnaturally low. I'm talking about the big boys — the Smithfields, the Tysons and the Archer Daniels Midlands of the world — which the farm bill subsidizes in the form of direct payments for grain (their feed is then artificially cheap). In doing that, we indirectly subsidize industrial farms' pollution; the health care costs (associated with animals bursting with corn fat, or animals reared on a constant cocktail of antibiotics); and the costs of insuring these companies against food-borne illness (brought on by a system that's run amok — or should I say that runs in muck, with animals living in their own waste).

We need a farm bill that makes corporations internalize the costs they impose on society in the same way that they internalize their profits.

Some people argue that the desire to promote smaller, family-run local farms is gratuitously effete and nostalgic. That's just nonsense. It's the agriculture industry's mind-set — high on capital, chemistry and machines — that is actually old-fashioned. Just as the Industrial Revolution of factories with heavy machinery and billowing black smoke is yesterday's news, so too are our unsustainable farming operations. Nonetheless our legislators continue to marvel at how modern industrial farms have become, and to invest ever more of our tax dollars into them.

In place of these outmoded and untenable practices, we need a farm bill that promotes sustainable farming research. We need increased money for the existing Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, as well as an overhauled version of the Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems, a competitive grants program introduced in 1998 whose financing has since disappeared. These organizations encourage and finance innovative technologies to profit, and empower, the independent farmer.

We also need to ensure more money for things like the Conservation Security Program. Unlike most conservation programs that take land out of production, this one offers financial support to farmers who cultivate their fields in an environmentally sustainable manner. But enrollment in this program has been severely restricted since its 2002 inception, in large part because of \$4 billion in budget cuts. That's a 50 percent cut in a program that supports the basic tenets of land, water and wildlife conservation — tenets that go hand in hand with small-scale, chemical-free and crop-diverse agriculture.

These are also the tenets that built the world's great cuisines — Chinese, Italian, peasant French, Indian. Good gastronomy evolved out of good farming — the best chefs have merely delivered on what farmers have worked out over several centuries. A tomato bursting with flavor, or an impossibly juicy leg of lamb, is no accident. If we're able to eventually clone that, great, but let's do it in the name of flavor, not corporate greed.

Right now, as members of Congress prepare to debate the details of the new farm bill, let's hope they allow the best examples of gastronomy to be their guide. Great farming, environmental stewardship and nutritious food will not be far behind.

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