



STATE INNOVATION EXCHANGE

AGRICULTURE & FOOD SYSTEMS

THE FARM BILL: A Primer for State Legislators

Background: The Farm Bill is incredibly important to every American, but it is an often ignored piece of federal legislation. While the name of the legislation suggests it address agriculture and speaks to our agricultural history as a country, the legislation impacts food programs for low-income families, training and support for farmers to learn, expand, and improve their operations, research dollars, university funding, insurance, and infrastructure investments for rural America.

The first Farm Bill, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, was part of the New Deal, and speaks to the agricultural foundation of our economy. The original goals of the legislation, “to keep food prices fair for farmers and consumers, ensure an adequate food supply, and protect and sustain the country’s vital natural resources, were a response to the Great Depression and Dust Bowl.” Since then Congress has enacted 18 farm bills, generally focusing on the main commodities in the marketplace, corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton, rice, peanuts, dairy, and sugar. Much has changed in the years since the first bill, but these three original goals remain.

Historical and Continuing Injustice in the Farm Bill: Tragically, like other federal laws and programs, the farm bill has been used in ways to perpetuate systemic racism by disallowing participation in programs for minority farmers, by not allocating resources to areas that are primarily black communities, and by limiting access to grants and loans to farmers of color. These issues have been litigated in federal court and the USDA policies have been found to be discriminatory. This history of discrimination began with the passage of the very first farm bill when President Roosevelt favored policies for southern cotton farmers that discriminated against black sharecroppers working the same lands. It is imperative that each new version of the farm bill be used to dismantle the discriminatory policies and ensure equity in programs and distributions of funds to all areas of the country and all farmers.

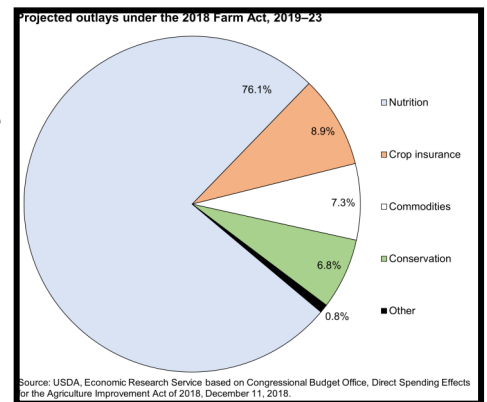
Current Status: The last Farm Bill, called the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, was authorized in 2018. The Farm Bill is supposed to be reauthorized every five years and was supposed to be reauthorized in 2023. That did not happen and instead in November 2023 Congress enacted a one year extension to cover FY 2024 and crop year 2024. Now Congress must work to pass a 2024 Farm Bill, although election year politics may stall final passage.

How the Farm Bill is written: Much like the legislative process at the state level, the process begins with the House and Senate Agriculture Committees drafting their versions of the bill for consideration, then each body votes on their version, then the conference committee works out the differences, then the full chambers vote on final bill. Following passage, the appropriations process will provide funding, except that mandatory programs are always funded.

Funding the Farm Bill: The Farm Bill authorizes spending in two categories, mandatory and discretionary. Mandatory programs in federal law are often called “entitlements” and the farm bill provides funding for mandatory programs, include SNAP. The discretionary programs must be funded through the regular budget process. Four titles accounted for 99% of the 2018 farm bill’s mandatory spending: nutrition (mostly SNAP), commodities, crop insurance, and conservation.

Cost of the Farm Bill: According to the Congressional Budget Office, the cost of the 2018 Farm Bill is about \$428 billion over five years.

How to read the Farm Bill: The Farm Bill is divided into titles, or chapters, of the legislation. There are currently twelve titles in the Farm Bill; Commodities, Conservation, Nutrition, Credit, Rural Development, Research, Extension, and



Related Matters, Forestry, Energy,

Aspirational Title for the Farm Bill: Many progressive advocates see the need to address corporate agriculture and the consolidation of our food system by adding a competition title to the next farm bill. This could address corporate monopolization and practices that favor corporate farms over small farms and that incentivize new farmers and competition.



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Five Important Ways the Farm Bill Impacts Your State: The Farm Bill impacts all residents of your state. This lists some of the most significant provisions impacting your constituents.

Food for low-income families: The nutrition title covering these programs was added in the 1973. The relative proportion of spending on these programs reflects a difficult reality across our country; that our neighbors are struggling to meet their most basic needs. In 2023 the nutrition title is 84% of the baseline spending, was 76% in 2018, and 67% in 2008. The increase represents the increasing demand for food from families across America.

In the fall of 2023 there was discussion of a government shutdown if hardliners didn't get their preferred cuts. Their demands were to cut SNAP, or food stamps, and other nutrition programs. The significance of this can't be overstated; the increasing need to access to food nearly shut down the federal government. Currently, more than 40 million Americans receive SNAP benefits, include tens of millions of children. It's not just children, with inflation and other budget demands, food access is limited for fixed income Seniors, working families, families supporting a family member with a disability or illness.

Infrastructure investments for rural America: Title VI of the current farm bill is the Rural Development title, addressing reauthorization of most USDA rural development programs, including investments in broadband, water and wastewater, waste disposal, facility development, and grant and loan programs that benefit rural communities. These investments are critical infrastructure for rural communities and can be complimented by state funding to maximize the benefits of the programs to all residents of your state. There may be many unrealized opportunities to access investments through these programs, as outreach may not get to everyone in need. State legislators can facilitate connections with USDA staff to help with securing these funds.

Financial support and training for farmers: Several titles of the farm bill provide training and funding, in the form of grants, loans, financing, insurance, and guarantees, to de-risk and incentivize certain farm activities. Some of this spending has become more controversial, with some pushing for more diversification of assistance programs to benefit organic farmers, for example, or more sustainable methods of farming. Institutional and governmental support of bad practices can make change harder to achieve. Every title of the farm bill includes a program that can provide support or training to farmers, although some are very competitive and others are hard for small farmers to compete for against the larger corporate farm operations.

Funding for Universities and research efforts: Title VII, the research title of the farm bill, includes funding for programs that were first passed into federal law more than a hundred years ago, including the Land-Grant University formula funds (Hatch Act (1887), Smith-Lever Act (1914), and McIntire-Stennis (1962)). Together this trio of bills expanded the work of land grant universities to include agricultural experiment stations, created the Cooperative Extension Service, and again expanded the work to include forestry work. This title also includes the Agriculture Research Service (ARS) and Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). Some of the noteworthy work accomplished through these research dollars includes specialty crop research (everything not considered a commodity and most of what we eat), organic research, and emerging agricultural production, all programs that can help transform our current unsustainable food system to the sustainable food system of our future.

Crop Insurance: Title XI addresses crop insurance. Agriculture requires significant upfront costs that can make farming cost prohibitive. Crop insurance programs address this risk by providing the funding needed to plant and insure those crops to harvest. These programs can be considered controversial and have significant impacts on how and what food is produced in America. This title can also help transform farming practices to being sustainable by providing investments for practices that add resilience to farming operations and make them less vulnerable to unpredictable weather events that can be devastating for farmers.