

Welfare for millionaires

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Uncle Sam's farm support program is, to a disturbing extent, a handout for millionaires paid for by ordinary Americans. So it was disappointing to see Missouri's two senators vote against a very modest attempt to limit the giveaway.

As it is, in Manhattan alone, more than 500 individuals and businesses are being paid farm subsidies, according to a count by the Environmental Working Group. That's Manhattan, New York, not Manhattan, Kansas. Paul Allen, the billionaire co-founder of Microsoft, gets a farm subsidy. In the past, so have talk show host David Letterman and basketball star Scottie Pippen. Buy a spread somewhere, pay others to farm it, and even a skyscraper-dweller can get on the gravy train.

A program originally designed to help small family farmers has turned into welfare for the wealthy. Besides the occasional comedian and tech mogul, lots of money is going to very prosperous farmers who own very large farms.

As the new Farm Bill worked its way through the Senate last week, Missouri's senators voted against an amendment that would limit one kind of payment, commodity subsidies, to \$250,000 per family. In Missouri, only a dozen farmers landed that much loot from the commodity program in 2005.

Had the limit passed, those farmers still would have been free to reap additional sums from other farm subsidy programs.

To her credit, Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill did support limiting payments to families earning less than \$750,000 per year - after farming expenses are subtracted. That \$750,000 is 14 times the median family income in Missouri. Republican Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond voted against that limit. Both senators should explain why working families should be taxed in order to send magnificent checks to the rich.

Both the subsidy and the income limit failed to garner the 60 votes needed for passage in the Senate. The Senate went on to pass the entire farm bill by a 79-14 vote. The bill now heads for negotiations with the House, which has passed a bill with a \$1 million income cut-off.

With crop prices high because of demand for ethanol and biofuels, 2007 presented an ideal year to reform the subsidy program. Instead, we've seen more of the same congressional kowtowing to the farm lobby, which allied itself with urban liberals who support the bill's food assistance programs.

President George W. Bush supported an income limit of \$200,000 for subsidies, and pressed hard for it. He proposed reforming today's bizarre system of farm entitlements and moving to a sensible program that helps farmers when their income drops. Such a system would better conform to international trade agreements.

Congress wouldn't go along. Now Bush is threatening to veto, both over the lack of income limits and various tax issues. This editorial page often disagrees with Bush, but on limiting farm subsidies, he is right.

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