

D.C. indecency

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

American farmers are enjoying an all-time high in profitability, thanks both to a big, sustained global surge in demand for their crops and extremely generous federal subsidies that are a leftover of the Great Depression, when farming was besieged.

So how should Congress and President Bush adjust federal agricultural policy to deal with farming's unusual combination of vast profits and huge subsidies? Whether you're a liberal who thinks the federal government is already too accommodating of the rich, a conservative who thinks giving public funds to a thriving industry is indefensible or a moderate who holds both views, the answer could not be more obvious: You cut the subsidies.

To the president's credit, this is just what he is calling for in negotiations over the massive, long-term farm bill now pending before lawmakers. The Bush administration has won support from a strong cross-section of both the House and Senate, including a surprising number of farm-state legislators who fear a public backlash when it sinks in that wealthy corn, wheat and soybean growers are getting so much taxpayer help - and at a time when the cost of food is steadily increasing. Hopes for reform hit new highs in December when 56 senators supported a proposal to cut subsidies by more than 30 percent and to end the bizarre practice of paying some farmers to not grow crops.

Three months later, unfortunately, it now looks like we could end up with a farm policy that's worse than ever. Congressional negotiators - not content with the usual five-year subsidy bill - are said to be close to wrapping up work on a 10-year, \$600 billion plan that subsidizes heretofore-unfavored crops and adds \$10 billion in new subsidy programs for wealthy commodity growers.

The sticking point in the deal is an agreement that the additional \$10 billion must be offset by cuts elsewhere or by new revenue. Here is where the farm bill saga goes from troubling to unconscionable: House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is considering cutting food stamps provided to poor people and imposing taxes on credit card and debit card transactions by all Americans in order to free up funds to help rich farmers get richer.

It's a wonder the liberal San Francisco Democrat can even show her face in her hometown.

Why on earth did Nancy Pelosi end up being the bagman for corporate agribusiness? Because she thinks a change in farm policy could cost Democrats control of the House, and she likes being speaker.

In other words, for the crassest of political reasons.

We urge President Bush to stick to his veto threats - and we hope that the reform coalition of 56 senators (including California Democrats Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer) can reassemble in coming weeks.

Americans already face plenty of daunting challenges. The last thing we need is for the federal government to sign up for 10 years more of one of the most conspicuously crazy domestic policies in U.S. history.

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