The Farm Bill: Veto it

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

To a considerable degree, the federal Farm Bill of 2007 - which, five months into 2008 has yet to be passed by Congress - is a welfare program for millionaires. President George W. Bush calls it wasteful and promises to veto it when it hits his desk.

He's right, but it's not an easy call. The $280 billion bill sets policy for both farm payments and nutrition programs for the next five years. The compromise about to emerge from Congress increases nutrition spending by $10 billion over current programs. That's not much, spread over half a decade, but it's badly needed.

More than 25 million Americans on food stamps are struggling to cope with rising grocery bills. School lunch programs and charity food pantries also are feeling the pinch. The bill would relieve some of these pressures. It would make it slightly easier to enroll for food stamps. Schoolchildren would get more fresh fruit and vegetables.

The nutrition program part of the bill is good; we only wish it went further. The problems lie with the rest of the bill.

The American system of farm subsidies is a triumph of politics over common sense. It supports some crops - such as corn, wheat and soybeans - while largely ignoring others. It often pays farmers without regard to economic need, even without regard to whether the recipient is a farmer.

"This is the black hole of agriculture. It doesn't make sense, but farmers continue to get it," says Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, himself no foe of farmers.

As a result, some residents of tony urban neighborhoods who never dirty their fingers get subsidy checks based on their ownership of farmland. For example, the government sends checks to 333 "farm owners" in Clayton alone, according to the database compiled by the Environmental Working Group from federal records.

This is welfare for the wealthy, pure and simple.

Even Bush, who surely has nothing against welfare for the wealthy, sees this as absurd. He proposed limiting subsidies to families with incomes under $200,000.

He also proposed reforming subsidies to better reflect the ups and downs of farm income, rather than the simple ownership of farmland. Farmers facing drought, or tumbling crop prices, would get more help, while prosperous farmers would get less.

Congress prefers today's wasteful system. Under the bill headed for Congressional approval, couples with an annual income of $1.5 million still would receive checks from the taxpayers, as would individuals raking in $750,000 a year.

Congress may well override Bush's veto or simply extend the current farm bill for another year. The losers would be the poor and schoolchildren, held hostage by greedy "farmers."

It's not too late for Congress to impose some reason on its farm subsidy program. The Farm Bill is an uneasy compromise between congressmen from farming districts and lawmakers backing nutrition programs. It's time for urban and suburban lawmakers to flex their muscle; millionaires don't need handouts from the taxpayers.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch â€“ CNS.

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