



How the Way We Farm Makes Us Sick: 6 Things You Need to Know about the U.S. Farm Bill

By Ron Weiss, MD
March 05 2018

It's no secret that the U.S. healthcare system is in deep trouble. Staggering statistics appear each day. Obesity, heart attacks, diabetes, cancer, dementia—America is awash in chronic disease. Meanwhile, a whopping 86 percent of the [more than \\$3 trillion](#) our nation spent in 2016 on healthcare did not actually go toward making people healthy. This money was spent on chronic illness, supporting a medical care system that results in a life sentence of doctor visits, drugs, procedures, and pain. Fed up with the revolving door of drug- and procedure-based contemporary medicine, in 2011 I bought a in my home state of New Jersey and opened my primary care practice right in the middle of the growing fields.

I was committed to giving patients and the public access to the healing properties of conscientiously grown fresh produce. Thus, Ethos Farm and Primary Care were born amid the lush rolling countryside of the Garden State. Every Saturday during the growing season, our “Doctor’s Farm Market” offers dark leafy greens and other colorful vegetables, fruits, herbs, flowers, and more to patients and the public. On other days, you’ll find me planting, seeing patients, teaching medical students and residents, introducing a Mindful Kitchen cooking class, or leading a hike across the verdant property.

With deep roots in farming and a belief in Food as Medicine, I’m convinced that the policies of the USDA have played a primary role in creating the epidemic of chronic illness that underpins America’s healthcare crisis. These policies are determined by one of the most complicated puzzles of U.S. legislature, the Farm Bill.

The 2018 Farm Bill is being drafted right now. Here's what you need to know about it and how it affects the nation's health:

1. What is the Farm Bill?

The main agricultural and food policy instrument of the federal government, the U.S. Farm Bill is a document passed by Congress with a single vote every five years or so, and it covers agriculture and all other interests of the USDA. Introduced during the Great Depression to help struggling family farmers and create a dependable food supply, the bill now includes policies that greatly impact the environment, food production, and food availability. The Farm Bill has evolved into an exceedingly complex and influential tool that easily hides special interests and creates just enough confusion to mask policies that damage our health and the environment.

2. What happened to the family farm?

In 1971, President Richard Nixon appointed Earl Butz as Secretary of Agriculture. As head of the USDA, Butz drastically changed American farming by shifting federal Farm Bill subsidies that had been in place since the Great Depression, from small family farmers to large, industrial-sized agribusinesses. Butz urged farmers to “Get big or get out,” and rewarded them for planting commodity crops like corn and soybeans “from fence row to fence row.”

The subsidies encouraged the overproduction of massive amounts of corn and soy. Remarkably, the vast majority of these corn and soy crops are not grown for human consumption, but end up as feed for animals. All of this feed made it possible to construct enormous Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). Large numbers of animals are warehoused in these crowded CAFOs and fed corn- and soy-based diets that sicken and fatten them up in record time. The result? A bounty of cheap, unhealthy, taxpayer-subsidized animal and processed foods that are the basis of the Standard American Diet, otherwise known as SAD.

3. Industrially farmed, subsidized corn, soy, and wheat underpin the American food system.

If you are serious about avoiding heart attacks and cancer, you’ll want to avoid 80 to 85 percent of shelf space in the average American supermarket. These shelves are filled with animal-based and/or highly processed foods derived from subsidized corn, soy, and wheat. The irony: These relatively cheap foods cause very expensive diseases and environmental destruction, making them the most expensive foods ever grown.

4. There exists a grave conflict of interest at the USDA.

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The USDA is tasked with setting the nation's nutrition guidelines. Yet this is in direct conflict with its primary interest: ensuring the profitability of producers of foods such as dairy and meat. These foods are known to increase the risk of obesity, diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular disease. Is it any wonder that programs administered by the USDA and funded by the Farm Bill preferentially [feed school children](#) and the [poor](#) unhealthy foods that cause chronic disease?

5. The same federal ag policies that make us sick also make our planet sick.

The farming practices that underpin our healthcare crisis also degrade our environment. To grow vast swaths of these monoculture crops, [enormous amounts](#) of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides are required. Many of these agricultural chemicals are suspected endocrine disruptors and carcinogens that are thought to [alter human DNA down through the generations](#).

During my lifetime alone, annual worldwide pesticide production has increased from 200,000 tons to more than 5 million tons, according to estimates from [The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations](#). It has gotten to the point that many of these chemicals now [rain down upon us](#). These pesticides wipe out beneficial and native wildlife such as [honey bees](#), [monarch butterflies](#), and [songbirds](#).

The chemical fertilizer used to intensively grow corn and soy in the central United States flows into the Mississippi River and its tributaries, ending up in the Gulf of Mexico where an immense dead zone has been created. Within this zone, no marine life exists other than an overgrowth of algae. As of last summer, this [dead zone](#) had grown to the size of New Jersey.

6. Changing how we spend billions can save us trillions.

Redirecting the billions of taxpayer dollars we spend to subsidize an industrialized agricultural system that sickens us and using that money to instead promote the consumption of disease-reversing whole plant food diets would ultimately save the U.S. trillions of dollars in medical and environmental costs.

If, by eliminating Farm Bill subsidies, the cost of a Quarter Pounder with Cheese were to rise from, say \$4 to \$15, eating habits would likely shift toward eating healthier foods, especially if at the same time, a program were put in effect to incentivize the consumption of whole plant foods. In fact, a large nationwide program in South Africa has already demonstrated that the public will consume more fruits and vegetables when these healthy foods are subsidized.

A Call to Action: Make Your Voice Heard

The good news is that just as food has been a primary cause of chronic disease, so can it be the cure. This year we have the opportunity to get Americans well by changing federal agriculture policy in a meaningful way. Rep. Mike Conaway, Chairman of the House Agricultural Committee, is in the process of drafting the Farm Bill. He has already indicated that he will [prioritize support of the dairy industry](#).

You can help by sending a letter to Rep. Conaway today. Below is a letter I've written to Rep. Conaway, which you are welcome to use. Together we can make a difference in the way America farms and what we eat. We can get our health back and safeguard the planet's health for future generations.

*The Honorable Mike Conaway
House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515*

Dear Representative Conaway,

By many measures, America faces a healthcare crisis. Perhaps most scary is the fact that the nation's medical expenditures are not sustainable. The 17 percent of GDP (about \$3.2 trillion) the nation now spends on health care will rise to 20 percent of GDP by 2025, according to The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The CDC estimates that 86 percent of this money is not actually spent on making people healthy; it is spent on treating and sustaining chronic illness such as

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cardiovascular disease, cancer, obesity, diabetes, and dementia. The medical evidence shows that most of this chronic disease is the result of the food we eat and can be prevented and even reversed by eating a plant-based diet. This is why one of America's foremost cardiologists, former president of the American College of Cardiology Kim Williams, MD, recommends such a diet.

The reason I am writing to you is that I see a clear link between federal agricultural policies and the production and consumption of the animal and processed foods that define The Standard American Diet. This diet underlies the nation's epidemic of chronic illness. Federal ag policies favor the production of cheap corn and soy feedstocks that support the animal and processed foods industries. Federal policies also promote the consumption of these same disease-causing foods by children in the school lunch program, by the poor in SNAP programs, and by the general public through USDA-sponsored checkoff marketing programs.

I implore you, as Chairman of the House Agricultural Committee, to consider adopting the following policies into the 2018 Farm Bill, for the sake of our nation's health:

- 1. Eliminate all forms of subsidies that currently go to support the production of corn and soybeans. This would likely have the effect of making animal and processed foods more expensive, thus disincentivizing Americans' consumption of these foods.*
- 2. Redesign the SNAP and school lunch programs to discourage the consumption of processed and animal-sourced foods, and to encourage the consumption of unrefined plant-based foods. Nearly a decade has passed since the 2008 Farm Bill funded the [Healthy Incentives Pilot \(HIP\)](#), which demonstrated that SNAP beneficiaries will increase consumption of healthy fruits and vegetables when financially incentivized. If these incentives were combined with disincentives to purchase low-nutrient foods, SNAP beneficiaries would likely consume even greater quantities of fruits and vegetables.*
- 3. Use the money that currently underwrites subsidies of corn and soybeans to institute a program under the 2018 Farm Bill that encourages all Americans to consume foods that prevent and reverse chronic disease: fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes. Here is an example of a successful large, nationwide program from South Africa that increased consumption of healthy foods and decreased consumption of chronic disease causing foods: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3433851/>*

By changing the way we spend billions in agricultural subsidies, the nation can save trillions in medical care costs.

Thank you for listening.