



About Jim Harkness

Jim Harkness joined IATP as president in July 2006. Previously he served as Executive Director of the World Wildlife Fund in China from 1999–2005. He has written and spoken frequently on China and sustainable development, and has served as an adviser for the World Bank and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota and has an office in Washington D.C..

The end of the Farm Bill?

WE MUST BUILD A NEW POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR A FAIR, SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEM

FEBRUARY 4, 2013 – “There is absolutely no way to explain this other than agriculture is just not a priority,” said Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow on the Senate Floor on New Year’s Day.

She was describing the bare-bones Farm Bill extension agreed to as part of the stop-gap budget deal.

Most astonishing was how Congress and the White House seemed to ignore the longstanding importance of this legislation when they failed to provide mandatory funding for a whole host of programs in the absence of its full renewal.

The Farm Bill is the nation’s largest piece of agricultural legislation. It’s the usual vehicle for far-reaching programs to boost crop production, protect farmers, advance rural development, conserve energy, provide for international food aid, and, notably, run nutrition assistance programs. And it’s in limbo.

This stripped-down extension came just after the House allowed the Farm Bill to expire, never even calling for a vote. House Speaker John Boehner simply didn’t bother. He clearly didn’t pay any political cost for that—he was overwhelmingly reelected as House Speaker shortly thereafter.

Is this the end of the Farm Bill? Collin Peterson, the ranking Democrat on the House Agriculture Committee, seems to think so.

The Minnesota lawmaker has written House leadership asking for an agreement to bring a Farm Bill to a vote if it comes out of committee—otherwise, he just won’t bother writing one. As importantly, he asks whether their plan is simply to renew the Farm Bill (rather than actually writing the traditional five-year bill) and look for ways to scale back the bill each year.

The reality is that this key legislation has drifted a long way from its original form passed during the Great Depression. Back then, it was called the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Originally, it was designed to address the oversupply of agricultural commodities while ensuring that the marketplace paid farmers a fair price.

Now, managing supply and stabilizing prices for farmers and consumers—despite evidence of enormous taxpayer savings—isn't a priority in Washington. The modern-day Farm Bill, while having many good programs, virtually ignores the biggest and most pressing challenges in agriculture: wild market volatility that threatens financial stability for farmers and access for consumers, climate-induced droughts and floods, and the increasing monopoly power of corporations. Nor does it address major problems of the food system as a whole, such as the health crisis associated with childhood obesity or the exploitation of workers all along the food chain.

Instead of acting as a vehicle for real reform, Congress has made it clear that the Farm Bill will be, in essence, a step down from the status quo. The skeletal structure stays in place as it's bled by a thousand budget cuts.

It's time we pay attention to the messages Congress is sending and begin to look beyond the Farm Bill to build a new policy framework for a fair, sustainable, and healthy food system.

We need policies—many of which are starting to appear at the community and state level, rather than out of the bumbling federal framework—that get to the heart of the challenges farmers face. We need fair and transparent pricing, adequate insurance programs, financing options for farmers or food business operators, and fair competition in the marketplace. We need our labor laws to catch up with the challenges of farm workers, food processing workers, and those working in restaurants and supermarkets.

In the short term, we can't forget the important programs the Farm Bill funds. But real change will require a new approach that values the needs of farmers and society as a whole over the demands of corporations.