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The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy promotes resilient family farms, rural communities and ecosystems around the world through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy.

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## A "Healthy Food" Bill for Not So Healthy Americans

By David Wallinga, M.D. and Robert S. Lawrence, M.D.

What does farm policy have to do with obesity? Quite a bit, as it turns out. And now health professionals are stepping into new territory – the writing of the 2007 Farm Bill – to show how this massive piece of legislation is critical to more than just farmers.

Last month, more than 300 physicians, obesity researchers, public health professionals and others sent a letter to Congress calling for this year's Farm Bill to be a "Healthy Food Bill." Specifically, they are pointing to farm policies and an unbalanced food system as important contributors to the wave of obesity and diet-related disease (as well as other environmentally-related chronic disease) in the U.S.

Obesity already costs the U.S. more than \$117 billion annually, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service. But the epidemic in children, and what it means for their chances of having diabetes, premature heart disease and stroke as adults, promises a much worse health crisis in the making.

Crisis also creates opportunity, sometimes in unlikely places. Few American kids today consume healthy diets, such as those recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's own Dietary Guidelines for Americans. They eat too few fruits and vegetables and whole grains, and too many added sugars, unhealthy fats, and refined grains. Critical pieces of the Farm Bill, written in the coming weeks, could open the door toward making healthier foods more accessible and more affordable for more people.

We have created schools and communities where unhealthy foods are cheaper and more accessible than healthy foods. This is especially true in lower income communities where childhood obesity has hit hardest. And while unhealthy foods were getting cheaper, the cost of fresh fruit and vegetables rose nearly 40 percent from 1985 to 2000, according to the USDA. Farm policies have played an important role.

Among the tens of billions spent annually under the Farm Bill, about a third goes to support the production of commodity crops, such as corn and soybeans. For more than three decades, our farm bills have promoted overproduction of and low market prices for these commodities, which in turn contribute to schools and communities being flooded with highly processed foods made from the cheap starches, and added fats and sweeteners derived from these commodity crops. These foods tend to be rich in calories, but poor in nutrients.

A 2002 study by USDA researchers points to the 300 additional calories the average American consumes today, relative to 1985, as an important cause of obesity. Added sweeteners (mostly high fructose corn syrup) and added fats (mostly soybean oil) account for about half of those extra calories.

Most corn and soybeans are not eaten directly by people at all – they are fed to cattle, hogs and poultry. In the industrialized factories that produce most U.S. beef, pork and chicken (and increasingly fish, like salmon), animals that had evolved to eat grass or forage instead are fattened on corn and soy. Scientific data show grain-fed animals tend to produce meat or dairy products higher in unhealthy saturated fats, and lower in healthy fats than that from their grass-fed counterparts.

With this Farm Bill, Congress should make Americans' health a priority. The government's agricultural policies should:

- Give all Americans better access to healthy foods;
- Improve school access to healthy foods, helping to make childrens' diets consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- Make fresh produce and other healthy foods more affordable relative to unhealthy foods;
- Help build the infrastructure needed to get affordable, healthier foods into lower-income communities.

America's children are in crisis. It is time to put our money (read tax dollars) where our mouths are – or at least, where we want our children's mouths to be. We need a Healthy Food Bill.

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