

Better Farm Bill: If you eat, you can't afford to yawn!

“Oh yeah?” (Yawn...)

Just give me a chance here. It was a rain-drenched Friday afternoon, and people gathered at Bel-larmine University in Louisville to learn everything they could about the Farm Bill. To call it the *Farm Bill* is misleading, because this federal legislation – due for review and renewal next year – should be called the *Nutrition, Farm, Health, Energy, Environment and Rural Development Bill* since it covers so much of what shapes our food system and society.

“Ho hum. What were all those losers doing there?”

They came to attend a Farm Bill Forum in Fall 2006, co-sponsored by the Presbyterian Hunger Program (PHP). Bob Gronski of the [National Catholic Rural Life Conference](#) (NCRLC), the forum convener and a recipient of One Great Hour of Sharing grant money, told the students, professors, environmentalists and farmers gathered that reform of the Bill was critical to the well-being of our planet.

“Oh yeah? Can you spell h-y-p-e-r-b-o-l-e?”

Don't get sarcastic with me. Just keep listening. Steph Larsen of the 335 organization-strong, national [Community Food Security Coalition](#), a long-term PHP grantee, inspired people to consider the scope of the Farm Bill. From Food Stamps and nutrition programs for pregnant mothers to the tens of billions of dollars of subsidies given mostly to the largest and richest farm operations, the Farm Bill literally shapes how *and if* people are adequately fed.

“I don't get Food Stamps, so why should I care?”

But you do drink water and eat, right? Hank Grady of the Sustainable Agriculture Committee of the National Sierra Club spoke of the devastating toll our modern agriculture has on the environment. Seventy years ago, all agriculture was organic and most agricultural inputs (for example, seeds and fertilizer) originated on the farm. Now, agriculture is petroleum-based, and chemical fertilizer and pesticide run-off poisons our soil and water, not to mention the toxic residues on the food itself. Reforms to the Farm Bill can strengthen conservation measures to make farming more sustainable and healthy for everyone. Hank told us not to be intimidated by the complexity of the legislation, but to plug in wherever we can. Even small changes in the Farm Bill can have widespread effects.

“Okay, but is it important enough for me to actually do something?”

Martha Noble, a policy analyst for the [Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#), yet another recipient of a PHP grant to support their work to reform the Farm Bill, informed us that trade negotiations were putting pressure on our farm subsidies system....

“Wait. Why do you keep bragging on all these grants you give?”

We are proud of the great work we're able to support through the One Great Hour of Sharing because of the many generous donors and congregations.

“Okay, whatever. What was that about subsidies?”

The government pays billions of dollars in subsidies to commodity farm operations (for example, cotton, corn, wheat and soybeans), which tends to cause over-production. The glut of commodities lowers their price and enables the exporters to dump them on countries below the cost at which those foreign farmers are able to produce the crops. Those farmers are driven into debt and

eventually lose their farms. The low prices also hurt family-run operations in the U.S. because they depress farm-gate crop prices.

That's not fair! Okay, well I guess I'm getting interested."

Good. I wish you could have been at the Forum. Brother Dave Andrews of NCRLC, who has visited with poor farmers all around the world, talked about how our U.S. farm policy impacts family farmers here and overseas. His message came down to this: If we don't bring back real competition, and better prices for farmers, and policies that secure our food system, the hardships and suffering will only increase.

"This is a democracy, right? Why don't we just *fix* the Farm Bill?"

Excellent idea! And I don't want to discourage you by talking about the powerful agribusiness lobby and the revolving door between agribusiness and the U.S. government, but we do have our job cut out for us.

Oh, now you're going to get analytical on me and not do anything?!

Not at all; after all, we are people of faith! For decades, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been supporting and accompanying poor farmers in other countries and family farmers in the U.S. ([farm_and_ag_policies.pdf](#)).

Recent changes in our global and national food systems have brought things to a crisis. So we need everyone to understand the Farm Bill and work for changes that bring greater justice and dignity to farm workers and farmers, and a sustainable and healthy food system.

"Lofty words, but what exactly can I do?"

Start with three simple steps.

ONE – Get to know people in the food system and learn from them – a farmer, a farm worker, a rancher, a supermarket produce manager. You could invite them to your youth group or bible study class to hear about their challenges and joys.

TWO – Support local farmers by buying food directly from them at a Farmers Market or through a CSA-Community Supported Agriculture, or at an independent grocer that sources local food.

THREE – Finally, keep coming back to the [PHP Farm Bill website](#) to learn more and download resources. We'll be putting up a Farm Bill advocacy guide and new fact sheets regularly. Or just give the Hunger Program a call!