

Farm Bill Showdown

by John Nichols

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The 2007 farm bill, as approved by the House on the eve of the August recess, is as shambolic a piece of legislation as will ever be OK'd by a chamber that frequently endorses the incomprehensible and the indefensible. But what is truly frustrating about the House's version of the five-year, \$286 billion blueprint for everything from agriculture and food policy to trade and energy development is that this complicated mess of a measure cannot be easily hailed or condemned. On the plus side, it makes significant new commitments to encourage sustainable farming practices, fund the conversion to organic farming, strengthen food-safety protections and expand nutrition initiatives that are the essential food-policy components of this omnibus legislation. On the negative side, the House bill proposes to open gaping loopholes that would allow environmentally destructive factory farms to qualify for funding intended to help family farmers conserve the land; maintains corrupt practices that stifle competition in the livestock industry; and fails to endorse basic health-and-safety moves like banning the practice of blasting spoiled beef with carbon monoxide to make it appear wholesome.

Hovering above all the good bits and nasty pieces of the measure is that it would do little to change our corrupt system of paying subsidies to some of the wealthiest nonfarmers in the world. Nor does the House address the fact that the bulk of the money intended to maintain diverse and competitive family farms would go to a handful of Southern states that overproduce crops like rice and cotton.

The best that can be hoped for now is intervention by the Senate, where Agriculture Committee chair Tom Harkin says, "We can't afford to settle for an extension of the status quo--not in terms of budget, and not in terms of policy." But for that to happen, we need to broaden the public discussion at a time when, as Representative Rosa DeLauro says, "too many Americans know too little about the farm bill and its impact on our lives."

The fact that debate about farm and food policy plays out on the margins of the national discourse, thanks to media that treat rural America as a punch line, makes it too easy for politicians and interest groups to distort the discussion. For instance, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi can get away with her absurd claim that the House bill is "reform" that "takes America's farm policy in a new direction." Not true. The Speaker chose the status quo over innovative proposals by author Michael Pollan, chef Alice Waters and savvy policy groups like Food and Water Watch and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy to stop pouring federal dollars into the coffers of agribusiness, establish a real safety net for working farmers, protect the

environment and encourage the production of healthy foods. But just as Pelosi is wrong to dub herself a reformer, so too are the editorial writers and Washington think-tank gurus who grumble about the rejection of their favored "reform." The plan so beloved by those so distant from rural America--a scheme by Representatives Ron Kind and Jeff Flake to establish the farming equivalent of the "individual retirement accounts" promoted by those who would destroy Social Security--failed because farm and consumer groups saw through its false promise of "market solutions."

Rejecting real reform as well as false promises, Pelosi backed a "Christmas tree" measure, which offered something for everyone--from agribusiness to Congressional Black Caucus members seeking long-overdue justice for minority farmers to consumer groups that want country-of-origin labeling on meat--then played on the fears of urban House members who know less about countercyclical payments than about crop circles. To maintain their House majority, Democrats voted for a bill Pelosi told them would re-elect vulnerable farm-state Democrats--including nine freshmen on the Ag Committee.

That may be shrewd politics. But it's foolish policy. So now it falls to Harkin to cobble together an alternative measure that can pass the Senate, survive a messy reconciliation of House and Senate plans and then overcome a threatened presidential veto. That's probably too tall an order. But Harkin recognizes what needs to be done. He's a passionate supporter of nutrition and conservation programs, he wants a tight cap on federal payments so they don't go to millionaire "farmers" and he recognizes that the United States should do away with direct subsidies that fail most farmers, consumers and the environment.

As he shapes the Senate version of the farm bill, Harkin should embrace the proposal of three dozen farm and rural groups--led by the National Family Farm Coalition and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy--and their labor, religious and environmental allies. They want to replace subsidies with a federally defined price floor that would in effect be a minimum wage for farmers and to reinstate strategic grain reserves to stabilize crop prices. Harkin should listen to Iowa farmer George Naylor, who serves as president of the farm coalition and who says it is still possible--and politically smart--to forge a farm and food bill that "will benefit family farmers by giving them a fair price for what they produce instead of continuing with ineffective subsidies that have failed rural America."