

Agricultural Policy and the Farm Bill

LWV Study Pages November 2023

The 4 minute YouTube video below by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition shows a broad introduction to what the Farm Bill is about:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHGad3uzV0c>

What Is the Farm Bill?

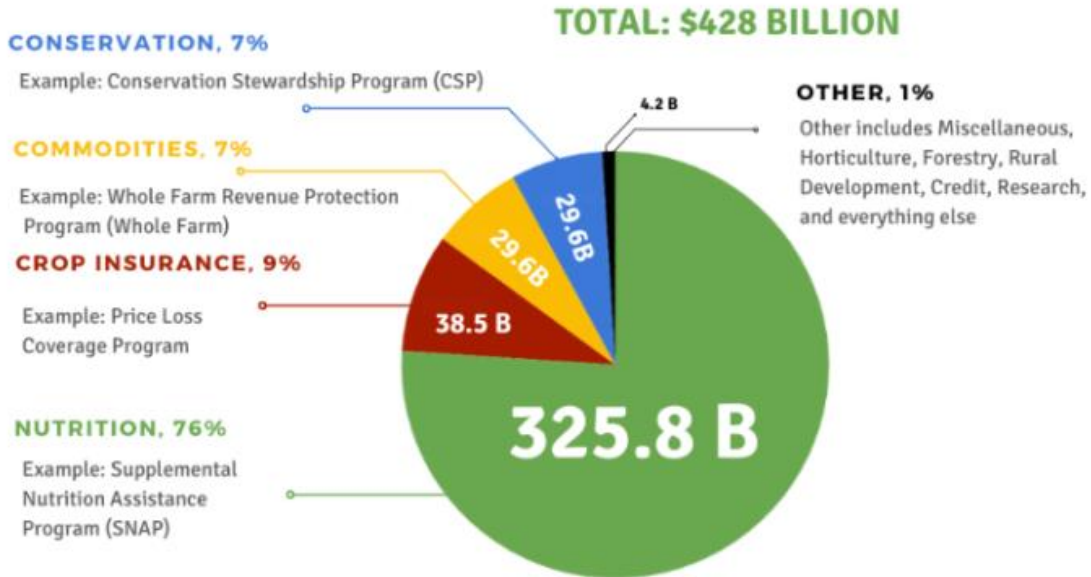
The US Farm Bill, which is updated every 5 years, is one of the largest single programs of the Federal government. On paper it runs to 8000 pages and distributes nearly a trillion dollars/year. It is due to be renewed this year

The provisions of the Farm Bill are divided into what are called “Titles”—overarching categories related to food and farming in the U.S. The 12 Titles in 2018 were: commodities; conservation; trade; nutrition; credit; U S rural development; research; forestry; energy; horticulture; crop insurance; and miscellaneous. The diagram below shows the approximate percentages of the total yearly appropriations that were assigned to the listed titles in the current bill. Note the largest percentage, nearly 75%, is under the nutrition title which provides for SNAP, WIC, and the various other programs that deliver food assistance for low income people. These programs are already being pushed back via the budget negotiations in Congress. As a portion of the federal budget, the Farm Bill is second to defense spending.

Most of the remaining 25% goes directly to large corporate agriculture businesses via commodity price supports, crop insurance, and structured conservation programs that do little to offset the damage to soil and water that industrial agriculture causes. Approximately 1% is distributed among the rest of the titles including: Horticulture, forestry, rural development, research etc.

Commodity crops are primarily corn, wheat, soybeans and a few others that are largely used for processed food, biofuels, and for export. *Horticulture* crops are fruits, vegetables, nuts, herbs, and meat or dairy that is cultivated in small mixed use farms; the foods that reach our tables whole and recognizable for what they are.

FARM BILL PROJECTED FUNDING, IN BILLIONS 2019-2023



A Brief History of the Farm Bill

The Farm Bill was first established in 1933 as part of FDR's Agricultural Adjustment Act during the great depression to help farmers keep their land and return it to production after the dust bowl drove them out of the business of growing food. It was largely intended to manage the price of commodity crops, but it also funneled commodity surpluses into benefits for low income people (the nutritional programs that later became SNAP, WIC and others). From the beginning there were controversies. It was initially ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (deemed an overreach by the federal government because of the tax structure that was used to create it), but was later revised to become the Agricultural Adjustment Act that is used today.

<https://www.snapttohealth.org/farm-bill-usda/u-s-farm-bill-faq/>

Who is responsible for creating the Farm Bill and funding it?

The Senate and the House of Representatives each have a standing Agriculture Committee that meets to address the legislation when needed. Ohio's representatives to the House committee are: Rep. Shontel Brown (D District 11) and Rep. Max Miller (R District 7). Ohio's Senate Ag Committee representative is Senator Sherrod Brown who is a long-standing member and who has several marker bills proposed under his name as well as a knowledgeable staff member who responds to agriculture issues.

How does the legislative process work?

Reauthorization of this bill must be done by Congress. If they are unable to come to agreement on changes, they will reauthorize the previous version of the bill. The Farm Bill will likely not be addressed by the full Congress until after the budget agreement is signed.

The process for reauthorization involves ‘marker’ bills proposed in committee for changes under the various titles, and hearing testimony from interested parties regarding such changes. These meetings are recorded in their entirety and may be reviewed by the public. The Senate committee meeting website <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/> is easier to use than the House committee’s. It lists the members, as well as every meeting, and all the witnesses who participated.

Committee hearings are held, and marker bills developed and co-sponsored throughout the 2 years leading up to consideration of the reauthorization. The marker bills that make it through committee suggesting how the laws or budget apportionment should be changed are then submitted to the respective chamber for approval.

What kind of changes are being proposed for 2023 - by whom?

As you might expect, the corporate industrial agriculture businesses have well developed lobbies in the capitol who will press to continue collecting the lion’s share of the farm supports. This process will lead to more consolidation as small to mid-sized farms and aging farmers give up their land for lack of being able to make a living on the farm and/or to fund their retirement.

Organizations across the country have developed policy platforms that, if adopted, would direct more of this federal money toward those small to mid-sized farms, to new farmers who need capital support to acquire land, to research, and to those farm businesses that serve local markets, and use organic and regenerative farm and forestry practices. They argue that the titles that serve the food system that supports our health, our environment and our economy need to receive a larger share of our tax money.

See the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) platform and marker bill tracker here: <https://action.oeffa.com/farm-bill/>

OEFFA is a member of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC). See its platform here: <https://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/2023-farm-bill-platform/>

Other local organizations with platforms or policy positions: The Sierra Club, and the Greater Cincinnati Regional Food Policy Council.

The Ohio legislature also has Senate and House agriculture committees, but while they address some of the same issues at the state and local level, they do not impact the federal Farm Bill.

The League's Positions on Agriculture

LWVUS does not have a position on the Farm Bill itself but does on natural resources, agriculture, and meeting basic needs that support policies within the Farm Bill. The LWVUS signed onto two letters regarding the current pending Farm Bill. One, which was brought to National by the Iowa State League, focuses on maintaining the \$19.5 bn allocated to conservation and climate smart agriculture investments in the Farm Bill. The second is regarding strengthening SNAP benefits (food stamps) and ensuring gender justice.

Statewide or local action about the Farm Bill must be approved by LWVUS. A few successful examples include LWV Massachusetts which has a Farm Bill toolkit, LWV Upper Mississippi River Region Inter League Organization (state leagues Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota and Iowa) which held a webinar in August, and an action alert about the Farm Bill was issued in each of the four states. In addition, LWV California issued a statewide action alert in support of maintaining the funding for climate smart agriculture.

The full LWVUS Agriculture position statement is found on pp 114-116 in the Impact on Issues publication of the national League. https://www.lwv.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/LWV_ImpactOnIssues2022-2024.pdf. It begins with these statements.

LWVUS believes that federal agriculture policies should promote adequate supplies of food and fiber at reasonable prices to consumers, farms that are economically viable, farm practices that are environmentally sound, and increased reliance on the free market to determine prices.

Sustainable Agriculture

Federal policy should encourage a system of sustainable, regenerative agricultural production that moves toward an environmentally sound agricultural sector. This includes promoting stewardship to preserve and protect the country's human and natural agricultural resources.

Local LWV Vice President Kimberly Jacobs is part of the LWV delegation to the UN Climate Change conference (COP28) in Dubai in early December 2023. She has been working with the [LWVUS Food, Soil & Agriculture Group](#) within the Climate Change Task Force and is looking forward to briefing the Cincinnati area League when she returns.

Suggested study/discussion questions:

1. What kinds of factors and experiences influence your family's choices around food? And how might those factors differ for others' choices?
2. Several organizations have adopted policy platforms regarding reauthorization of the Farm Bill and suggesting changes. What parts of the policy platforms that you have looked at do you think are most important?
3. Given the long, well established political process that governs/regulates the food system from farm to table in the US, where do you see opportunities for individuals or organizations to influence the system?
4. What advocacy or education actions should the LWV take as Congress considers reauthorization of the Farm Bill? Advocacy by the state or local LWV could be based on the LWVUS positions, but would need LWVUS approval.