



# Agricultural Subsidies Outdated

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It's deficit-cutting season!

Which, I suppose, is the political equivalent of spring-cleaning. In theory, it's supposed to go something like this — the Democrats and Republicans come together with their respective priorities, work out a deal, and then hack off portions of the welfare-state/hegemonic-military power that is our federal government.

In practice, Rep. Paul Ryan wants to slash Medicare and give the savings to the rich, while everyone else just sits on their hands.

It's all been a bit pathetic. Especially because there really are parts of the federal budget that ought to be cut.

Farm subsidies, for example, would be a fantastic start. To be fair, that wouldn't come close to solving our budget problem — they cost roughly \$15 billion annually — but it would be fantastic policy nonetheless.

Opposition to farm subsidies is nearly universal among those who think and write about the issue; there aren't many things that the Cato Institute and environmentalists agree on. Likewise, there isn't much common ground under both the unapologetically gluttonous Rush Limbaugh and the highbrow food activist Michael Pollan.

They all, however, think that agricultural subsidies are, well, stupid. And they are! On environmental, economic, humanitarian and gastronomical grounds – we should take a big old ax to the whole system.

Every conceivable justification for farm subsidies crumbles before the facts, but if you haven't heard them, here's a review.

First of all, farm subsidies don't really help small farmers. The vast majority of the money goes to large agribusinesses. Those corporations are then basically paid to produce five staple crops — wheat, corn, soybeans, rice and cotton. That artificially lowers the price of those crops, subtly distorting the American diet away from fruits and vegetables.

Also, cheaper corn means cheaper animal feed, which means cheaper meat. I'm as carnivorous as the next guy, but I see no particular reason why the government ought to subsidize my hamburger.

In fact, this distortion in favor of meat and a handful of crops is awful for the environment. Overuse of fertilizer is bad for our soil and rivers, and meat production is a leading source of carbon dioxide.

Worst of all, our faux-cheap foodstuffs wreak havoc on the livelihoods of Third World farmers who are priced out of the market for their crops.

And, of course, that cheapness is pure illusion. It's all paid for with American tax dollars.

The only people who genuinely gain from our agricultural-subsidy-smorgasbord are farmers and the politicians who love them.

And that is why, at the end of the day, these subsidies are not going anywhere. As much as pundits and wonks are united in opposition to agricultural subsidies elected officials are united in support.

And it's no mystery who will win that battle.