

DAILY LOCAL NEWS

Editorial: Failed farm bill laden with pork for rich farmers

May 23, 2018

Every few years, Congress passes a pork-laden monstrosity called a farm bill. This year's farm legislation was no different.

When the House rejected the \$867 billion farm bill proposal last Friday, the result was not because of its core intentions but because negotiations didn't result in a promise for future immigration measures support sought by the House Freedom Caucus.

Every Democrat voted against the measure, as did 30 Republicans. Many of the GOP lawmakers are members of the House Freedom Caucus and voted no after failing to get concessions on spending and a future vote on immigration in exchange for their support.

The bill put forward by the House Agriculture Committee proposed a whopping \$868 billion in spending over the next decade. As with other iterations of the farm bill, three-quarters of the spending was to fund food stamps through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, while the rest came down to programs to help farmers, with plenty of crop subsidies.

Fundamentally, the farm bill is a way for Congress to redistribute the nation's wealth to lower-income people on one end and wealthy farmers on the other. For all of their talk of limited government and fiscal responsibility, congressional Republicans did little to curtail the excesses of the farm bill, instead making slight tweaks that didn't meaningfully curtail reach of the federal government or significantly alter the course of federal spending.

With respect to SNAP, it's worth noting that under President George W. Bush, the cost of SNAP went from about \$17 billion at the start of his term to \$38 billion by the time he left office.

At its peak, the cost of the program was more than double that under President Obama. While the cost of SNAP fell slightly to \$67 billion in 2016, it's difficult to believe that the country is in the ninth year of an economic expansion and yet costs haven't fallen further.

As Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute notes, nearly a quarter of SNAP benefits, which are designed to combat hunger, goes toward the purchase of junk food.

Edwards suggests people might be less inclined to enroll for SNAP if food stamps were restricted to more nutritious food.

That's not a bad idea.

But Republicans have instead proposed attaching a job-training requirement for those between 18 and 59 who have no children under 6 and aren't disabled.

While the Congressional Budget Office notes such a change could reduce benefits by \$9.2 billion between 2019 and 2028, the cost of implementing the job-training program would cost \$7.7 billion over the same period.

In other words, most of the savings would just go toward more federal bureaucracy.

Worse, other increased costs in the bill would wipe out the rest of the savings.

Which brings us to the farm side and the question of why taxpayers are continuing to subsidize wealthy farmers: According to a 2017 report of the Congressional Research Service, in 2012, “farms with market revenue equal to or greater than \$250,000 accounted for 12 percent of farm households, but received 60 percent of federal farm program payments.”

Unlike SNAP, which at least mostly benefits low-income Americans in need, farm subsidies just needlessly distort the free market to the benefit of a few regardless of how much money they have.

“If conservatives care about welfare reform, they would be wise to apply those same principles to the ‘farm’ portion of the farm bill as well,” as Caroline Kitchens at the R Street Institute recently put it.

Unfortunately, it seems true, principled conservatives are hard to find anywhere in Congress. But if there are any left, we’d like to see further cuts to farm subsidies when the 2018 farm bill comes up for air.