

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

The farm bill is still laden with pork for rich farmers

May 16, 2018

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

The bill put forward by the House Agriculture Committee this year proposes a whopping \$868 billion in spending over the next decade. As with other iterations of the farm bill, three-quarters of the spending is to fund food stamps through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, while the rest comes 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 have done little to curtail the excesses of the farm bill, instead making slight tweaks that don't really 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 is likely to reduce benefits by \$9.2 billion between 2019 and 2028, the cost of implementing the job-training program is expected to cost \$7.7 billion over the same period.

In other words, most of the savings will just go toward more federal bureaucracy. Worse, other increased costs in the bill 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.