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Nov 12th, 2010 at 5:29 pm

[Farm Subsidies and Fine Print](#)



Vicki Hartzler beat longtime Democratic Representative Ike Skelton in Missouri and at first glance appears to be delivering some [much-needed Real Talk](#) on farm subsidies:

The congresswoman-elect would exempt some of the federal budget’s high-cost categories — including Social Security, Medicare and the Pentagon budget — from cutbacks. But she would not exempt agricultural subsidies, another major area of federal spending popular in rural areas such as west-central Missouri’s Fourth District. Among the many farms to receive such subsidies is the 1,700-acre Hartzler farm, which — according to the Environmental Working Group’s “Farm Subsidy Database” — received about \$774,000 in federal payments (mainly commodity subsidies for corn, soybeans and wheat) from 1995 through 2009.

“Everything should be on the table,” she says. **While she says some agriculture programs represent a “national**

defense issue” because they help guarantee that “we have a safety net to make sure we have food security in our country,” Hartzler adds: “Should we continue the CRP [Conservation Reserve] program, where you pay farmers to not plant ground and set it aside for awhile? I’m not sure. The time for that may be over.”

That sounds decent, but as Sallie James observes when you peer into there’s [much less here than meets the eye](#):

Let’s be clear about what Ms. Hartzler is talking about here. **Those “some” agricultural programs she says should be guaranteed on “national defense” grounds (see below) are what we commonly think about as “farm subsidies” — payments to farmers to produce certain commodities,** whether those payments are funded by taxpayers or consumers. They encourage overproduction and thus alienate our trade partners, complicate efforts to make global trade freer, [harm poor farmers abroad and damage America’s reputation in the process](#). They cost us billions of dollars a year.

What she’s talking about cutting isn’t the main suite of farm price support programs. Instead she’s “open to cutting farm programs that at least pretend to have environmental benefits.” These programs aren’t my favorite idea about how to spend money, but paying land-owners to maintain their land in ecologically sound ways is much less pernicious than paying them to overproduce corn and soybeans. What’s more, it’s a much smaller share of the overall budgetary pie.

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