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It's back: Farm bill still crammed with subsidies, pork

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Decades ago, when the late Harry Reid was relatively new to the upper chamber, a book arrived at our offices courtesy of the Democratic senator. It was "The Farm Fiasco" by libertarian author James Bovard, a piercing work that critically examined the labyrinth of subsidies, handouts, pork and market distortions that has characterized American agricultural policy since the Great Depression.

An accompanying note from Sen. Reid indicated he sympathized with the author's thesis.

Years later, Sen. Reid had risen to majority leader, and there he was in 2014 championing the nearly \$1 trillion farm bill stuffed "with more government subsidies, more government regulations and more waste," as one GOP critic described it. Sen Reid insisted the gargantuan legislation was good for Nevada because it included an extension of payments for rural counties.

There's a lesson in there somewhere about the political realities and the Beltway swamp.

Sen. Reid is no longer with us, but the farm bill remains an abomination that rears its hideous head every five years. Federal agricultural policy has survived repeated efforts at reform and generally marches forward unabated. The latest version now in Congress will cost \$1.4 trillion over the next 10 years, according to estimates, and includes the ever-growing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program -- food stamps -- making it even more difficult politically to oppose.

In addition, the Biden administration has shown no penchant at all for fiscal restraint, so it is a fool's errand to believe the White House will make any effort to limit spending on the farm bill.

In 2020, "farmers (on net) will derive almost 40 percent of their income directly from the U.S. government," Scott Lincicome of the Cato Institute wrote. "Given the duration and magnitude of federal support, there's perhaps no U.S. industry that has attracted more taxpayer subsidies -- more consistently -- than agribusiness."

Indeed, large wealthy farming conglomerates are the major beneficiary of crop subsidies, which primarily go to growers of rice, wheat, corn, soybeans and cotton. But even efforts to confine handouts to smaller mom-and-pop operators run into fierce opposition. It's

worth noting that many growers operate without subsidies and do just fine. In California, for instance, those who produce almonds, walnuts and pistachios have prospered largely without government intervention.

"At a time when the Biden administration is actively promoting industrial policy as a means of promoting American jobs and manufacturers (and making them dependent on government largess)," J.D. Tuccille of Reason magazine wrote last week, "the farm bill demonstrates the dangers in unleashing policy monsters on the world."

There was a day when even Harry Reid might have agreed.