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## **Republicans Are Weak on Farm Subsidies**

Congressional red-staters must take on their own constituents.

Last month, when the conservative Republican Study Committee released its plan for \$2.5 trillion in budget cuts over the next ten years, one enormous item of wasteful government spending was conspicuously missing — farm subsidies.

Perhaps that reflects the fact that 24 of the RSC's 165 members sit on the House Agriculture Committee, the notorious overseer of farm-welfare programs. Total direct government farm payments to the districts of those 24 representatives alone costs taxpayers more than \$1 billion per year. Numerous other RSC members hail from farm states, and therefore have a vested interest in protecting payments to their constituents. For example, RSC chairman Rep. Jim Jordan is not a member of the Agriculture Committee but represents an Ohio district that receives \$30 million in direct payments annually.

We are also seeing the usual quadrennial pilgrimage of supposedly fiscally conservative Republican presidential candidates to Iowa, where they swear eternal fealty to farm subsidies generally, but, even worse, to ethanol subsidies in particular. Perhaps the most revolting example of this spectacle was former House speaker Newt Gingrich's claim that opposition to ethanol subsidies and mandates stems from "big city" folks who just don't like farmers.

But Gingrich is hardly alone. Mitt Romney defends farm subsidies as a "national-security issue," because somehow if farmers don't get an annual government check, al-Qaeda will hold our food supply hostage. Romney, of course, is also a big backer of ethanol subsidies, as is former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty, who once keynoted the annual convention of the American Coalition for Ethanol. Sarah Palin? Mike Huckabee? Sorry, they are on the farm-subsidy/ethanol bandwagon too. Indiana governor Mitch Daniels sounded promising: "Farm subsidies in general ought to go away," he says. But he too can't break the ethanol addiction. A "national-security issue," he says.

Incidentally, ethanol subsidies were extended as part of the lame-duck session's compromise tax agreement in December. It was pushed in large part by six Republican senators, including John Thune, another putative presidential candidate.

The level of hypocrisy is breathtaking. For example, conservatives rightly denounced government subsidies to business when the auto industry was at issue. Why, then, are subsidies a good idea when directed to, say, Archer Daniels Midland?

Similarly, since the rise of the Tea Party, many Republicans have rediscovered fealty to the Constitution. Witness the cheers for Judge Vinson's decision striking down Obamacare on constitutional grounds. One might ask, therefore, where these "constitutional conservatives" find constitutional authority for farm programs?

And it is hard to see how anyone can claim to be a fiscal conservative while supporting \$15–35 billion per year in government spending that largely goes to a group of people with incomes above the national average. Farm income for 2010 exceeded \$92.5 billion. That's a 34 percent increase from 2009, and — even if you subtract payments from the government — 28.8 percent above the previous ten-year average. While conservatives often mythologize small farms, most farm subsidies go to large and corporate farms. In fact, the largest 10 percent of recipients receive 73 percent of all subsidy payments.

As for ethanol, this is a program that cost taxpayers \$7.7 billion last year while driving up food and gasoline prices — and that causes more environmental damage than it solves. The national-security argument is far more slogan than reality. Ethanol's impact on oil imports is minimal, less than 1 percent according to some studies. We could plant subsidized corn on every square inch of available land, and we would not significantly reduce our reliance on imported oil (most of which actually comes from such hostile countries as Canada).

Unsupportable as farm subsidies are, they are part of a larger context that will continue to bedevil Republicans as they try to cut federal spending. It is always easier to cut the other guy's subsidy. And some of the most deeply "red" states are among the biggest collectors of federal largess. In 2010, solidly Republican states such as Alaska, Kansas, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Virginia were among the largest recipients of per capita federal spending. That means any serious attempt to cut federal spending is going to require Republicans to take on their own constituencies.

Farm subsidies will provide an early test of whether Republicans can do this. So far, the results are disappointing.

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