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EDITORIAL: Hog tied

Back in 1996, Congress swore it was finally going to wean American farmers off taxpayer subsidies with the "Freedom to Farm" law. The law -- among other things -- "allowed" farmers big one-time payments in exchange for their promise to accept a phasing out of subsidies.

Farmers took the big one-time payments -- but then instead of accepting reduced subsidies of "only" \$47 billion from 1996 to 2002, they promptly started lobbying for large "supplemental" farm bills which ended up boosting their subsidies to \$121 billion over that period.

In 2008, lawmakers tried again for "reform," though they set their sights considerably lower. Framers of the 2008 "reform" promised it would cut government payments to wealthy farmers. It didn't.

Data made public Wednesday show that the wealthiest farmers in the country are still receiving the bulk of government cash, The Washington Post reported. Not only that, "a series of exemptions written into the bill has made it more difficult for the public to find out who is receiving what," the Post reports.

Notes Ken Cook, head of the Environmental Working Group, a Washington advocacy group, "They are well dug in. They have a strong interest in defending the status quo."

Mr. Cook's organization found that just 10 percent of farmers received 62 percent of federal farm payments in 2009, roughly the same amount as in 2007 and 2008, before the latest "reforms" were enacted.

Well, here's a novel proposal to get rid of subsidies for rich farmers: Get government out of the business of manipulating agricultural prices, entirely. End protective tariffs. Let the prices received by farmers be dependent on what consumers are actually willing to pay.

Farm programs "result in overproduction, overuse of marginal farmland, and land price inflation, which results from subsidies being capitalized into land values," reports the Cato Institute. "Subsidy programs create less efficient planting, induce excess borrowing by farmers, cause insufficient attention to cost control, and ... negative environmental effects" by subsidizing the excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides to grow crops on marginal lands.

Kill them.

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