

EDITORIAL: Bitter harvest

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If you're outraged by the fact that U.S. Rep. Allen Boyd, D-Monticello, receives federal agricultural subsidies for his family farm, you don't know the half of it. His largess is but a microcosm of how Uncle Sam's farm policy is obsolete, wasteful and counterproductive - and which often benefits those who need help the least.

The congressman owns a 51 percent share of Boyd Family Farms and 50 percent of Boyd-Tuten Cattle Farm. Between 1995 and 2006, Boyd Family Farms received \$1.2 million in taxpayer support; the cattle business got \$20,000. That's small potatoes when considering that Washington spends \$25 billion a year on farm aid.

However, the Boyd subsidies stick out because he is a member of Congress who sits on a House agriculture subcommittee, which should be a conflict of interest. Boyd's office is quick to point out that his subcommittee has no role in deciding who is eligible for the subsidies. Nevertheless, the congressman has supported the Farm Bills that authorize the subsidies.

The subsidy program was created during the Great Depression with the intent to rescue small, family farms. Back then, family farms comprised a quarter of the American population; today, farmers account for just 1 percent. Yet, the size of the program has increased, becoming a costly, highly bureaucratized nightmare that is more about doling out political favors than it is saving family farms.

Oh, politicians still like to wax poetic about supporting real salt-of-the-earth Americans, evoking images of "American Gothic" that have as much in common with reality as "Green Acres" does. Today, the most likely recipients of farm aid are large, profitable conglomerations whose K Street seeds in Washington have borne as much fruit as what they've planted in the ground. The biggest 10 percent of farm businesses have received 72 percent of farm subsidies (Boyd himself reports a net worth of between \$2.5 million and \$12.7 million, ranking him 47th out of 435 House members). Most farm aid is little more than corporate welfare.

Furthermore, federal subsidies for certain crops distort market forces and increase food prices for consumers, meaning they pay for those programs twice - once with their taxes, and again at the grocery checkout. Many subsidies encourage overproduction and misuse of farmland. They have greatly contributed to the erosion of the Everglades by propping up domestic sugar manufacturers there while Washington restricts their foreign competition.

Not surprisingly, given their complexity, farm programs are prone to fraud and abuse. According to the Cato Institute, since 2000, the federal government has paid more than \$1.3 billion in subsidies to people who own "farmland" that is not even used for farming.

The Obama administration and some in Congress have proposed farm program reforms, such as subsidy caps and limits on the size of recipients. However, such restrictions in the past were easily

subverted. The New Republic reports that when Washington capped the amount of subsidy money that any one farmer could receive, many farmers simply subdivided their farms into smaller pieces that were given to different family members or business partners.

Instead of trimming around the edges, Washington should get at the root of the problem and just eliminate farm subsidies.