



Republicans should let the farm bill stay dead

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On May 18, as the Republican-controlled House of Representatives continued its descent into chaos and irrelevance, the farm bill went down to defeat amidst dueling immigration proposals.

Yet while this latest snafu makes the Republicans look feckless once again, they should probably be thankful that they have been saved from this legislative dog's breakfast.

All farm bills are bad, pure creatures of the D.C. swamp, regardless of which party is in power, but Republicans appear to have worked overtime to make certain that this one confirmed the party's worst stereotypes.

Unsurprisingly, the bill cuts food stamps. There is a strong argument for this. The food-stamp program has expanded enormously in recent years, essentially doubling under President Bush and doubling again under President Obama. Despite the economic recovery, the program shows no signs of returning to pre-recession levels.

But Republicans somehow managed to cut benefits for recipients without actually reducing spending on the program. The bill would trim benefits by roughly \$9.2 billion over ten years (for a program that will cost around \$650 billion over that period). But it would increase administrative costs by \$7.7 billion over the same period, and when other new costs are included, the program would cost an additional \$500 million. That's not a lot of money by Washington standards, of course, but less money for poor people, more money for bureaucracy is not the best message.

Republicans also strengthened the program's work requirements, actually something of a return to pre-recession work mandates. This too is entirely defensible, given the ongoing decline in unemployment and the increasing shift of the program from temporary to long-term participation. But the Republicans combined the requirement with a massive increase in funding for a job-training program whose effectiveness was last evaluated more than 20 years ago, when

the Department of Agriculture found no evidence that it helped recipients find jobs. (That's one driver of the new costs mentioned above.)

While getting tough on food-stamp recipients, Republicans simultaneously opened the floodgates for corporate welfare. As usual, the big winners are corn, wheat, soybean, cotton, rice, and peanut farmers, who receive more than 90 percent of subsidies. And though farm subsidies are often sold through nostalgia for hardscrabble family farmers, the reality is that this bill is welfare for corporate agriculture. According to a 2017 report of the Congressional Research Service, "farms with market revenue equal to or greater than \$250,000 accounted for 12 percent of farm households, but received 60 percent of federal farm program payments." Maybe that's why just 600 companies spent half a billion dollars lobbying for the bill.

There are new welfare queens as well, including sheep farmers, who will see their subsidies restored after they were stripped out of the last farm bill. The bill also restored subsidies for "natural stone" (yes, rocks) exporters. There's a special piece of the pie for everyone from dairy farmers to rural broadband providers.

Nor would any farm bill be complete without a variety of measures designed to protect the U.S. sugar industry from competition. Those benefits help drive up U.S. sugar prices to double those of the rest of the world.

And to cap it all off, the bill actually expands a provision that makes it possible for cousins, nieces, and nephews of farm owners — who are not actively engaged in farming and who may not even live on a farm — to qualify for commodity subsidies.

The Republican leadership will eventually find a way to deal with the immigration rebellion (or rebellions) that killed this bill.

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