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The Draft 2018 Farm Bill Is Good for Big Ag, Bad for Food Systems

What to know about our most crucial food/farm legislation—and what you can do

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Every five years (if everything goes according to plan), Congress renews a package of legislation establishing the nation's food and farm policies. The current farm bill expires at the end of September, meaning the time is nigh for lawmakers to make decisions about a huge variety of federal programs.

Last week, the House Agriculture Committee, chaired by Republican representative Mike Conaway of Texas, unveiled a 641-page draft of the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 (HR 2). The agribusiness-friendly bill passed by a party-line vote of 26 to 20 following a five-hour debate during which Democrats on the committee voiced their opposition to slashing funds for SNAP (often referred to as “food stamps”), conservation, and renewable energy programs. The bill is expected to go to the House floor in May.

While groups representing the largest dairy, corn, wheat, and beef producers applauded the House Agriculture Committee’s work (the American Farm Bureau Federation described the approval as “great news”), the National Young Farmers Coalition, National Farmers Union, anti-hunger groups, and environmental advocates have expressed strong opposition. Dozens of organizations including the Sierra Club are opposing the draft bill outright, out of concern that the bill puts the environment and public health at risk and will result in a food system more dependent than ever on factory farms and chemical- and energy-intensive pesticides and fertilizers.

“Yet again we see House Republicans offering tax breaks to corporations at the expense of American families,” said Athan Manuel, director of public lands protection for the Sierra Club. “This bill takes food off the table, makes it easier for corporate polluters to contaminate drinking water supplies, weakens commonsense protections to keep wildlife safe from toxic pesticides, logs away the future for our forests, guts water conservation programs. The public deserves safe and healthy food, water, wildlife and forests.”

While Speaker Paul Ryan, the Wisconsin Republican, lauded the farm bill as “the precise thing we need to do to get people from welfare to work,” Democratic representative Chellie Pingree of Maine described the farm bill as “the latest partisan battle, following in the steps of health-care and tax reform.” She stated, “The draft was written by Republicans behind closed doors, and they’re hoping it passes quickly, before anyone even has time to read it.”

Most of us won’t, indeed, have time to read the full proposed farm bill. But as taxpayers and eaters, we all have a stake in the food system. So, *Sierra* created a primer that lays out, in broad strokes, exactly what’s at stake—and some actions you can take.

Conservation Programs: Federal programs that help farmers and ranchers improve water and soil quality, decrease synthetic inputs, and protect wildlife face the biggest cutbacks—Conaway’s draft proposes reducing them by about \$7 billion over 10 years (<https://www.cbo.gov/publication/53760>). The draft bill eliminates the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which helps supports holistic, multiyear management

plans for 70 million acres of farm and rangeland. While the draft does roll some of the CSP's features into the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which would grow from \$1.75 billion to \$3 billion annually, the EQIP is far narrower in scope. It simply provides funding for *individual* projects or practices that are good for the environment (like cover cropping or planting a pollinator habitat). The problem is that CSP is actually a lot stronger than EQIP—you have to have a contract and holistic plan, the idea being that people on-ramp from EQIP projects to CSP, which has farmers and ranchers *fully* adopting sustainable agriculture, not just doing little pieces here and there." Sarah Hackney, grassroots director for the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, said, "The CSP is overwhelmingly popular with farmers for its ability to improve the health of the land's soil, water, and profitability. Its elimination means fewer options for voluntary conservation, more pollution, and less resilient farms and ranches." Adding insult to injury, EQIP funds CAFOs (CSP did not), so critics anticipate that Conaway's bill would result in more overall funding to CAFOs. "It sets back the evolution of farm bill conservation by decades," Hackney said.

The House GOP proposal also weakens the Conservation Compliance Program (https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/payment-eligibility/conservation_compliance/index) for wetlands and fails to do what many environmentalists had hoped: to expand across the United States that program to prevent the conversion of carbon-rich grasslands into production sites for industrial commodities.

Forests, too, are at risk. The proposed farm bill would eliminate the requirement that the Forest Service consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service or NOAA Fisheries about whether forest management activity is "not likely to adversely affect" an animal, plant, or habitat protected by the Endangered Species Act. The House GOP's farm bill also excludes a variety of activities from environmental reviews for certain forest management projects like logging.

What You Can Do: Support the SOILS Act (HR 5188 (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/5188>)) and support clean water protections in the farm bill. **Send a message to save farm conservation programs by clicking here** (<https://www.addup.org/campaigns/save-farm-conservation-programs>).

Pesticides: In addition to slashing conservation programs that help farmers shift away from pesticide-intensive industrial farming, which threatens bees, butterflies, and other pollinators, the GOP House farm bill includes a number of outright giveaways to the pesticide industry. It undercuts the Endangered Species Act via a provision that allows the EPA to approve pesticides without considering the harm they pose to endangered species, such as salmon and honeybees. The GOP bill would also preempt

the rights of local governments to restrict certain uses of pesticides and would weaken restrictions on methyl bromide, a highly toxic soil fumigant.

The proposed House GOP farm bill limits the extent to which the EPA has to consult with FWS and NOAA Fisheries before approving new pesticides. Critics say this would make it harder for public interest groups to sue federal agencies that rubberstamp pesticides proven to harm protected species. Those measures "would undercut a major procedural protection put in place to ensure that you've got a disinterested and objective and sound look at the scientific evidence involving these kinds of risks," said Bob Dreher, the senior vice president of conservation programs at Defenders of Wildlife. "So this is a pretty fundamental assault on one of the major procedural protections."

Meanwhile, the House Agriculture Committee's Republican majority defended the proposed changes, in a fact sheet, as necessary to prevent "activist-initiated litigation."

What You Can Do: Call your representatives and ask them to oppose farm bill pesticide deregulation.

Nutrition Assistance: The proposed farm bill seeks to "fix" the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps. Often described as the "meat and potatoes" of the farm bill, SNAP provides food benefits to low-income individuals and families, and nutrition funding accounts for roughly 80 percent of the bill's funding. The GOP draft mandates new work requirements

(<https://www.motherjones.com/food/2018/04/house-republicans-propose-strict-work-requirements-for-food-stamp-recipients/>) for SNAP's recipients: All able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 and 59 would be required to work or be enrolled in a job-training program for at least 20 hours a week beginning in 2021 (and increasing to 25 hours per week in 2026), or risk being cut from the program for up to three years. According to the USDA, nearly two-thirds of SNAP participants are children, elderly, or people with disabilities. The USDA also reports that SNAP benefits to nonworkers typically only occur when someone is between jobs. Critics say these proposed changes could result in as many as 1 million people being dropped from the nutrition assistance program. Representative Pingree, who's also an organic farmer, wrote last week in *Civil Eats*

(<https://civileats.com/2018/04/18/rep-chellie-pingree-get-ready-for-the-2018-farm-bill-fiasco/>) that studies show that those SNAP recipients who can work, do work

(<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/most-working-age-snap-participants-work-but-often-in-unstable-jobs>), but that their jobs are by nature unstable. "Work requirements will do nothing but snatch away a lifeline from those who don't know where their next meal will come from," Pingree wrote.

“The proposals in this bill would lead to greater hunger and poverty among all types of beneficiary families, including the working poor, as well as reduced economic growth and productivity in communities across the country,” stated James D. Weill, president of the Food Research & Action Center.

The draft farm bill does call for expansion of the obscure SNAP Employment & Training (E&T) program, from about \$90 million in annual funding to \$1 billion a year over three years. Little evidence, however, shows that the SNAP training program actually works, and the bill doesn't stipulate how people would actually be served. The 2014 farm bill gave the USDA \$200 million to launch 10 state pilots to test new approaches to SNAP E&T. However, that experiment is not on track to show results in time to inform the next farm bill.

There is, however, one glimmer of hope in this arena: The 2018 draft increases funding for the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program (<https://nifa.usda.gov/program/food-insecurity-nutrition-incentive-fini-grant-program>)—which is designed to incentivize SNAP recipients to boost their SNAP benefits by buying more fruits and vegetables—from \$5 million to \$30 million by 2023.

What you can do: Defend SNAP. **Click here to send a message**

(<https://www.addup.org/campaigns/tell-congress-dont-undermine-anti-hunger-programs>).

Organic Agriculture and Local/Regional Food Programs: Despite America's burgeoning love for farmers' markets (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/press-release/national-farmers-market-manager-survey-shows-farmers-markets-continue-grow>), the GOP farm bill essentially abandons the Farmers Markets Promotion Program (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/fmpp>) (FMPP). Since it was first funded in 2006 (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/FMPP2016Report.pdf>), the FMPP—which awards grants that “support outreach and promotional activities that help direct producer-to-consumer markets become self-sustaining in communities across the country”—has helped the number of farmers' markets in the United States to more than double. The 2018 bill strips it of mandatory funding. It also cut funding for several other programs, including Value-Added Producer Grants (<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/value-added-producer-grants>), a competitive program that helps beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers to expand and market their products.

Beginning in fiscal year 2022, the new farm bill would also cut more than \$40 million a year from the Rural Energy for America program (<https://www.energy.gov/savings/usda-rural-energy-america-program-reap-grants>), which helps agricultural producers purchase and install renewable energy systems and participate in energy audits. Nor does the proposed farm bill reauthorize any part of the Organic Certification Cost Share

Program (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/occsp>), which helps thousands of small and mid-size farmers defray the significant (and often prohibitive) costs associated with obtaining and maintaining organic certification. Critics say this is another blow to small and family-owned farms.

And now for silver linings: The draft bill would establish a Food Waste and Recovery Liaison position at the USDA. The National Organic Program would be expanded to address the fraudulent import (https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/why-your-organic-milk-may-not-be-organic/2017/05/01/708ce5bc-ed76-11e6-9662-6eedf1627882_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4d718170dda1) of industrially grown food that fail to meet USDA standards for the coveted organic label. And the Organic Research and Extension Initiative (<https://nifa.usda.gov/funding-opportunity/organic-agriculture-research-and-extension-initiative>) would grow from \$45 million in fiscal 2019 to \$65 million by 2023.

What you can do: Support the Local FARMS Act (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3941>) (HR3941), a bipartisan proposal meant to chip away at the 15.6 million U.S. households lacking adequate access to healthy food while helping small and midsize farmers secure a steady demand for the food they produce (**send a message by clicking here**) (<https://www.addup.org/campaigns/support-sustainable-agriculture-and-increase-access-to-fresh-healthy-local-food-for-everyone>), and the Organic Agriculture Research Act (HR 2436 (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2436>)). **Send a message by clicking here** (<https://www.addup.org/campaigns/fund-organic-agriculture-research>).

Subsidies for Big Ag: The GOP farm bill contains no meaningful limitations on subsidy payments to industrialized mega-farms. In fact, the bill raises Farm Service Agency loan caps, making them less available to small, midsize, and beginning farms—and likely better serving larger farms and CAFO operations. The bill also contains loopholes that critics say help those connected to Big Ag to get even more money out of the federal treasury. For instance, the GOP farm bill allows farm owners' first cousins, nieces, and nephews to qualify for up to \$125,000 in commodity subsidies, so long as they earn less than \$900,000 in adjusted gross income. While Representative Conaway says this is intended to keep family farms intact across generations, groups including The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and Taxpayers for Common Sense have criticized this proposal for its potential to pave the way for America's largest farms to rake in virtually unlimited subsidies. "The proposal would not provide an adequate safety net for farmers and ranchers who have seen a significant drop in net farm income over the past five years," said a spokesperson for the National Farmers Union.

The House bill doesn't make any changes to crop insurance in order to help beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers access assistance. "It creates more loopholes in subsidy payments that will continue to distort land prices and create an unfair playing

field for farmers,” Hackney of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition said. The new bill also fails to remove barriers to conservation and stewardship activities within the federal crop insurance program, which discourages farmers from engaging in conservation practices such as cover crops by threatening penalties or the voiding of their coverage.

Kari Hamerschlag, deputy director for Friends of the Earth’s Food and Agriculture program, in an op-ed called the bill “Robin Hood in reverse (<https://foodtank.com/news/2018/04/opinion-republican-farm-bill-broken-food-system/>)”—taking from small-scale farmers and low-income families to further enrich agribusiness, factory farms, and crop insurance companies.” She wrote, “Limitless subsidies to mega-farms proposed in this bill will drive land costs up, small farmers out, and result in increased concentration in the agricultural sector.”

What You Can Do: Support the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Opportunity Act (HR 4316 (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/4316>)). **Click here to endorse this legislation via the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.**

(<http://sustainableagriculture.net/our-work/campaigns/fbcampaign/beginning-farmers-and-ranchers/beginning-farmer-rancher-opportunity-act-2017/>)

Food system watchdogs agree that this draft farm bill has a tough road ahead. Its fate on the House floor is uncertain—though many fear that all Republicans could, as we saw with December’s GOP tax plan, get browbeaten into submission. The Senate has already pledged to work on a bipartisan bill that will be less controversial. Democratic senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, the ranking member of the Senate agriculture committee, has stated that House Republicans “abandoned the bipartisan coalition of farmers, conservationists, nutrition advocates, and representatives of rural communities needed to get a farm bill done.”

In the meantime, you can stay updated on the fight for legislation that does *not* accelerate the destruction of natural resources, encourage overproduction of unhealthy foods, and exacerbate income inequality and consolidation of our food system, by connecting with the Sierra Club’s Grassroots Network Agriculture and Food Team on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/agandfoodteam>) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/sierraclub.agriculture.food/>).

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