

The big deal about the Farm Bill: What it means to us

By Chris Pawelski

Farmer

Many people wonder what the Farm Bill is. Well, the Farm Bill is the overarching legislation passed normally every five years that sets federal agricultural policy and spending. A few facts:

- * Total U.S. Department of Agriculture spending each year is approximately \$144 billion (Out of a total annual federal budget of \$3.7 trillion, USDA represents roughly 3.9 percent of federal spending.

- * Food Assistance and Nutrition Programs account for roughly 77 percent of annual agriculture spending. Various "Ag" programs, including crop insurance support, account for 15 percent; conservation and forestry add up to about 6 percent; and the rest is spent on other programs, including food safety, rural development, research and marketing and regulatory programs.

- * Of the 15 percent devoted to crop insurance and various Ag programs, most of that spending, about 6 percent, is spent on commodity programs that benefit a select few grain crops, formally known as the "program crops." These crops include field corn, wheat, cotton, rice and oilseeds.

- * The Farm Bill is divided into various sections called titles. The current legislation has 15 titles: commodity programs; conservation; trade; nutrition; credit; U.S. rural development; research; forestry; energy; horticulture; livestock; crop insurance and disaster assistance; commodity futures; trade and tax provisions; and miscellaneous. New titles can be added to the Farm Bill during the re-authorization process; the Energy title, for instance, was created in 2002.

How does the Farm Bill affect farmers and the public locally?

Well, if you grow one of the grain commodities, there are price and market support programs designed for you. There is a dairy price support program and the Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) program for dairy farmers. The current Farm Bill debate has included significant efforts to reform the dairy pricing system which controls how milk is sold.

Many of the farmers in Goshen grow vegetables and fruits, so-called "specialty crops." Specialty crop producers do not receive direct payments like the

grain commodities, with the exception of the very problematic disaster aid or SURE program and including conservation program payments for setting land aside for a specific number of years and crop insurance subsidies to help pay a portion of the premiums of the federal crop insurance program.

Most assistance for specialty crop producers is indirect. For example, the Research Title authorizes funding for the various land grant universities as well as the Cooperative Extension system to help pay for applied scientific research and other technical assistance to help growers better produce their crops.

Also new with the most recent (2008) Farm Bill was a Horticulture Title which included a newly authorized program called the Specialty Crop Block Grant program, created solely to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops. The funds, totaling \$55 million per year, are awarded as a block grant to the various State Departments of Agriculture who then award the funds to various institutions and organizations with the project goals of improving the marketing a production abilities of specialty crops. In New York, much of the annual \$1 million dollars was earmarked toward applied scientific research projects geared towards improving crop yields or more effectively dealing with pests.

Local farmers also actually benefit in an indirect way from the food assistance and nutrition sections of the bill. These programs include the Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP). As a state website states:

"Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) provides checks to women, infants and children through the Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC) and to seniors in the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) for the purchase of locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables.

The fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased with checks at farmers' markets during the summer and fall. The program runs from June - Nov. 15.

FMNP checks enable WIC participants and CSFP seniors to obtain nutritious fresh produce in addition to the foods WIC and CSFP that provide. Approximately 300,000 WIC and CSFP households benefit annually.

In 2011, there were 464 farmers' markets operating in New York. This number represents nearly 1,000 participating farmers.

Any significant cuts to food nutrition programs will include cuts to these specific programs - and numerous farmers in Goshen and locally participate in these programs.

New York now has four Congressional members who sit on the respective agriculture committees, including locally Rep. Sean Maloney and nearby Rep. Chris Gibson (Sullivan, Ulster, Dutchess etc) on the House Agriculture Committee, and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand on the Senate Agriculture Committee. This is a big change from just 15 years ago when no member from New York sat on either committee.

Having members locally and from New York gives local farmers a stronger voice in Washington. For example, Rep. Maloney was able to include a number of provisions in the recently defeated House version of the Farm Bill that would specifically benefit farmers in his district, including some new reforms for the problematic crop insurance program and a flood control in the black dirt provision.

On the Senate side, Sen. Gillibrand has been championing the Conservation on Muck Soils (COMS) program, a working farms conservation program created by former Rep. John Hall and nearly included in the 2008 Farm Bill.

Though farmers only represent less than 2 percent of the population, and federal farm program spending is less than 1 percent of the federal budget, the Farm Bill is important to everyone.

We in the U.S. have one of the world's cheapest food supplies; we spend less than 10 percent of our disposable income on food.

We also have one of the world's most abundant and safe food supplies.

Further, agriculture is still one of this country's most important exports as well as one of the most important aspects of our overall economy. In Orange County, agriculture is still our #1 industry.

Programs in the Farm Bill help conserve land and preserve our soils and feed our disadvantaged. This spending is one of the best "bangs for our buck" that we currently spend year after.

With the "big" news-out of Washington week before last that Congress had failed to pass the Farm Bill, I email our resident agricultural policy guru, Goshen onion farmer Chris Pawelski, and asked him what the news is all about. Chris is a fourth-generation onion farmer and an active farmer's advocate in Albany and Washington. "What IS the Farm Bill and how does it affect people in Goshen?" I asked. Here's his reply. (Thanks, Chris, for speaking plainly!) - Tom Leek, Indy editor