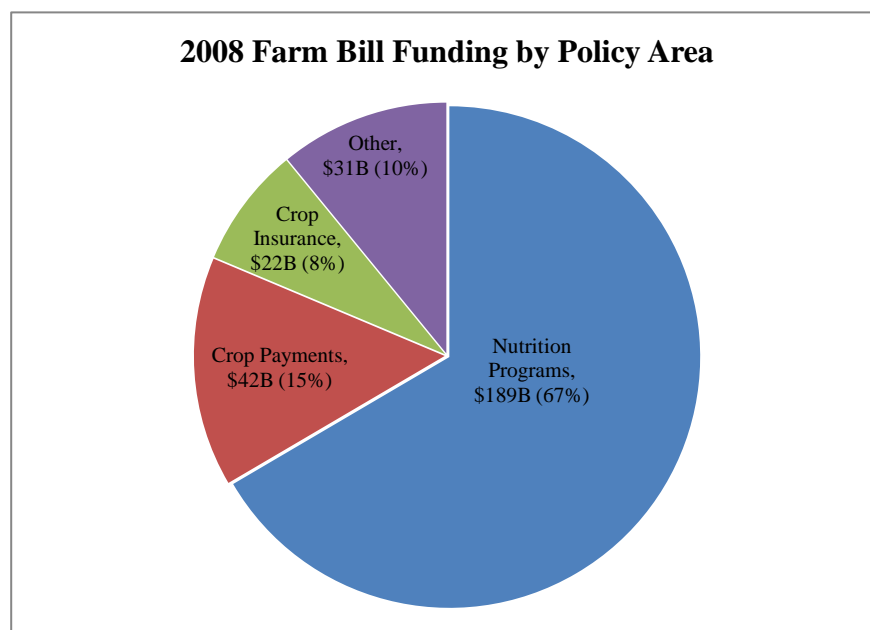


The 2012 Farm Bill: An Opportunity to Address Childhood Obesity

Introduction

The last “farm bill” (formally known as The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008) was enacted in 2008 and much of it expires at the end of September 2012. In light of these circumstances, and the fact that Congress has historically reauthorized the farm bill every five years, Congress is likely to address reauthorization of the farm bill during 2012.¹ Given this, those concerned about the childhood obesity epidemic have an opportunity to use the 2012 farm bill as a vehicle to make a positive impact on childhood obesity by advocating for policies to be included in the bill that will address this issue of vital importance to children’s health.



The 2008 farm bill was a \$284 billion piece of legislation. It allocated \$189 billion (67 percent) to support nutrition programs—including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program). Another \$42 billion (15 percent) funded programs that pay for commodity crops (e.g., corn, soybeans, wheat, and rice) and \$22 billion (8 percent) was set aside for crop insurance.² Within these broad policy areas, existing policies could be strengthened and new policies could be put into place that would make inroads in the fight against childhood obesity. With this opportunity on the horizon, the New England Alliance for Children’s Health (NEACH), a project of Community Catalyst, has selected the 2012 farm bill as a federal legislative priority this year.

Potential Policy Priorities

Obesity in children and adults is linked to a low-quality diet (defined as comprising too few healthy foods like fruits and vegetables and too many unhealthy foods like sugar sweetened beverages).³ Policy interventions aimed at addressing childhood obesity can, then, be aimed at either encouraging consumption of healthy foods or discouraging consumption of unhealthy foods.

One of the more dramatic examples of such a policy would be shifting subsidies away from commodity crops that are often processed into unhealthy ingredients (e.g., corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, corn starch, and soy oils) that contribute to childhood obesity and, instead, providing robust subsidies for specialty crops like fruits and vegetables. Addressing the way that subsidies are allocated could result in both lower prices for and increased production of fruits and vegetables—thus making them both more affordable and more available to children. However, this type of approach is so politically contentious as to make it infeasible in the context of the 2012 farm bill debate.

Given this reality, two policies that should be seriously considered as priorities for the 2012 farm bill that hold the potential to increase consumption of healthy foods or discourage consumption of unhealthy foods, and thus help to address childhood obesity in a politically feasible way are:

- **Maximizing the funding available to support the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP).** The FMPP is administered by the Agricultural Marketing Service and provides grants that finance both outreach efforts and systems aimed at enhancing access to farmers markets across the country (including facilitating the use of SNAP and Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children—WIC—benefits at these markets).⁴ Federal fiscal year (FFY) 2011 grants were given out in October 2011 and resulted in almost 150 farm-to-consumer initiatives across 42 states and the District of Columbia receiving \$9.2 million in total funding.⁵ The FMPP is a promising strategy aimed at addressing childhood obesity because it works to increase the availability of nutritious foods in “food deserts” (low-income areas with limited availability of such foods).
- **Maximizing the funding available to support the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP).** The FFVP is administered by the Food and Nutrition Service to make fruit and vegetable snacks available at no cost to all children in select elementary schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. For the 2011 to 2012 school year, an estimated \$158 million is being provided to schools as they work to improve the health of foods served by increasing the availability of nutritious foods like fresh produce.⁶ The FFVP is a promising strategy aimed at addressing childhood obesity because it requires states to select schools for participation in the program that have significant proportions of low-income children who generally have fewer opportunities to regularly consume fresh produce.⁷

There are many other policies that could be included in the 2012 farm bill that would make a positive impact on the problem of childhood obesity and advocates should strategically assess both the efficacy and political feasibility of such policies as the legislative process moves forward.

Timeline

As the process around the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction (more commonly known as the “Super Committee”) moved forward in the fall of 2011, the chairpersons of the agriculture committees in both the House of Representatives and Senate attempted to negotiate a new farm bill on an accelerated timeline, in a departure from the slower process that characterized the 2008 farm bill. Had the Super Committee been successful, House-Senate farm bill negotiators likely would have reached an agreement on a new five-year bill with significant funding reductions in order to fit into the deficit reduction framework that would have been established by a Super Committee deal.

As 2012 begins, the overall timeline for the 2012 farm bill remains uncertain but it is clear that at least the Senate is currently developing its version of the legislation with committee action on the bill anticipated in first few months of the year. This underscores the importance of advocates concerned about childhood

obesity paying close attention to this process and proactively preparing to engage in activities that will ensure that the opportunity to use the 2012 farm bill to combat childhood obesity is not lost.

The 2012 Farm Bill Advocacy in New England: The Path Forward

In its previous work supporting the successful passage of the Children's Health Insurance Reauthorization Act of 2009, the Affordable Care Act (2010), the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, and funding for the Children's Hospitals Graduate Medical Education Payment Program (2011), NEACH has consistently found mobilizing advocates from across New England to speak with one voice to members of the New England congressional delegation to be a highly effective strategic framework. This same approach will also be effective as the legislative process around the 2012 farm bill moves forward.

NEACH's work will begin by approaching members of the delegation who currently sit on the agriculture committee in either the House or Senate. In the House, this means that the following members need to be engaged: Representative Courtney (D-CT), Representative Pingree (D-ME), Representative McGovern (D-MA), and Representative Welch (D-VT). In the Senate, the only member representing a New England state on the committee is Senator Lahey (D-VT). Educating all of these members about NEACH policy priorities related to childhood obesity for the 2012 farm bill through direct meetings by NEACH staff with legislative staff is an important first step. However, strategic communication from NEACH partners across the region will remain vital throughout the campaign to pass a 2012 farm bill that takes full advantage of this important opportunity to address the childhood obesity epidemic.

NEACH has a unique opportunity with the 2012 farm bill to bring together child advocates traditionally focused on access to care with those concerned about the public health impact of childhood obesity. By diversifying NEACH's partner base in this way, advocates across the region will be able to play a significant role in advancing policy priorities in the 2012 farm bill that deal with childhood obesity.

¹ Renée Johnson and Jim Monk. *What is the "Farm Bill?"* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011), 1. <http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/crs/RS22131.pdf>.

² The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *The 2012 Farm Bill: An Opportunity to Support Farmers and Promote Public Health*. (Princeton, NJ: The Robert Wood Foundation, 2010), 1. <http://www.rwjf.org/files/research/20100803flag.pdf>.

³ Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity, *Access to Healthy Foods in Low-Income Neighborhoods: Opportunities for Public Policy*, (New Haven, CT: Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity, 2008), 5-6.

<http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/reports/RuddReportAccessToHealthyFoods2008.pdf>.

⁴ "Farmers Market Promotion Program," Agricultural Marketing Service, accessed December 30, 2011,

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/fmpp>.

⁵ "USDA Supports Diverse Food Access Through Farmers Market Promotion Program Grants," Agricultural Marketing Service, accessed December 30, 2011,

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateU&navID=LatestReleases&page=Newsroom&topNav=Newsroom&leftNav=&rightNav1=LatestReleases&rightNav2=&resultType=Details&dDocName=STELPRDC5094637&dID=157543&wf=false&description=USDA+Supports+Diverse+Food+Access++Through+Farmers+Market+Promotion+Program+Grants>.

⁶ "USDA Expands Access to Fresh Fruits and Vegetables for Schools Across the Nation: Investment Aims to Improve Nutrition and Provide Economic Opportunities to Producers," Food and Nutrition Service, accessed December 30, 2011,

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/PressReleases/2011/0133.htm>.

⁷ Food and Nutrition Service, *Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) Targeted School Selection and Outreach Process*.

(Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 2009), 1. http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Policy-Memos/2010/SP_10-2010_os.pdf.