

# MAPPING A SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE & PUBLIC HEALTH ALLIANCE FOR THE NEXT FARM BILL

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Work on the next Farm Bill (scheduled for reauthorization in 2012) is underway and public health and sustainable agriculture advocates are exploring provisions that will meet the goals of both groups. While there may be few initially obvious links between a country's farming system and the health of its citizens, there are in fact many connections between agriculture and environmental, economic, social and public health issues. These connections include diet but go well beyond it to include widespread use of pesticides, water quality, meat production systems and safety. Public health practitioners and farmers act within larger systems guided by policies that can encourage or discourage health.

The Farm Bill offers an opportunity to ensure that government policy encourages food production, marketing, processing and retail that increase local economic opportunities and access to good food while building resilient and sustainable farming systems. Federal funding for the next Farm Bill will be limited so it will be important for the various interest groups to unite around a set of policies that help remedy public health challenges while protecting natural resources and emerging agricultural markets.

### PROTECT GOOD PROGRAMS

In the last two Farm Bills, Congress funded several key USDA programs that support healthy food and sustainable production. Many of these good programs, however, do not have an automatic funding base after 2012. A good first step for public health and sustainable agriculture collaboration would be to work together to ensure the funding for these programs is renewed and expanded:

- Farmers Market Promotion Program
- Value-Added Producer Grants
- Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative
- Specialty Crop Research Initiative
- Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program
- Outreach & Technical Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers & Ranchers

### Possible Areas for Successful Collaboration

The [full report](#) describes areas of opportunity and need in the existing Farm Bill structure, and also presents a broad list of new policy ideas on which public health and sustainable agriculture advocates could collaborate.<sup>1</sup> As the report explains, for some of these provisions the benefits to both communities are immediately apparent; for others, the relationships are more complex or subtle – but nonetheless important.

In addition to the at-risk programs outlined above, public health and sustainable agriculture advocates could work together to promote the following policy goals.

- **CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTION:** Maintain and increase funding for conservation programs that help farmers use production methods that protect soil fertility and water quality and reduce their use of pesticides and other chemical inputs.
- **LOCAL AND REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS:** Invest in grants and loans to rebuild the infrastructure necessary for small and mid-sized farmers to provide healthy food to local and regional markets including schools, hospitals and food stores.
- **FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH:** Invest in research on the health impacts of local and regional food systems to improve nutrition and food security, public plant breeding programs, and organic and sustainable food production methods.
- **INCENTIVES FOR FARM-FRESH FOOD IN THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP):** Provide incentives for SNAP participants to purchase nutritious fruits and vegetables at farmers markets and other direct points of sale.
- **HEALTHY FOOD RETAIL:** Provide support for healthy food retail in underserved communities including grocery stores, farmers markets, and community-supported agriculture.

### Establishing Common Ground

The ideas presented in the full report were conceived following a conference in 2009 that brought together 100 leading experts in health, nutrition, obesity, sustainable agriculture, economics, business, marketing and public policy to discuss how we as a nation can move toward a healthier and more sustainable food system.<sup>ii</sup> Major support for this conference was provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Healthy Eating Research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.<sup>iii</sup> By identifying common ground on legislative provisions, both public health and sustainable agriculture efforts may be advanced in the upcoming Farm Bill.

#### **Sustainable Agriculture:**

*A system in which “a safe, nutritious, ample, and affordable food supply is produced by a legion of family farmers who make a decent living pursuing their trade, while protecting the environment, and contributing to the strength and stability of their communities.”*

~ National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

#### **Public Health:**

*“The science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts and informed choices of society, organizations, public and private, communities and individuals.”*

~C.E.A. Winslow, public health leader from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century

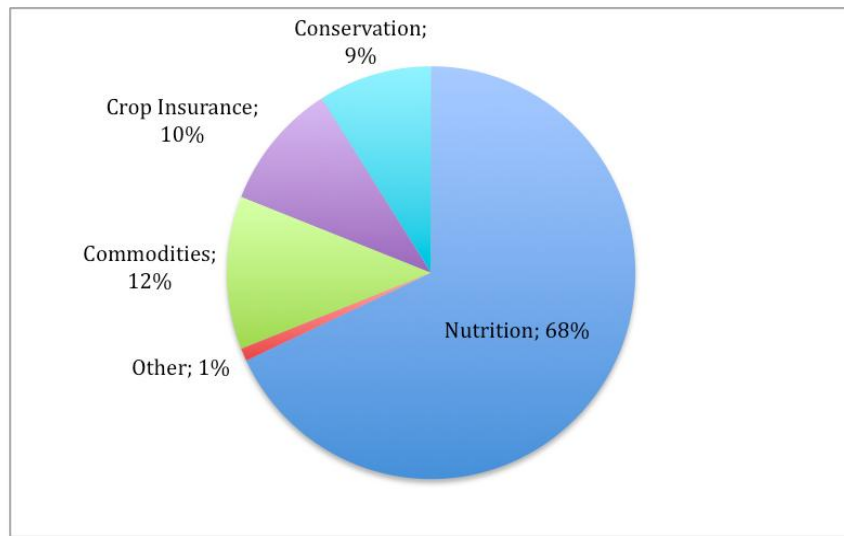
The report also:

- explains how public health and sustainable agriculture communities approach the Farm Bill;
- discusses titles of the Farm Bill most relevant to the intersection between these two fields;
- analyzes the current political landscape and its receptivity to these ideas; and
- suggests opportunities for policy collaboration in the next Farm Bill.

## Farm Bill Overview and Current Political Context

The Farm Bill is omnibus legislation reauthorized about every five years that governs much of our national food and farm system. Its major provisions include the Food Stamp program (now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP), farm commodity programs, crop insurance, and conservation programs. The last Farm Bill was passed in 2008 with an anticipated \$284 billion price tag over five years.

**Chart 1: Percentage of Total Farm Bill Dollars Allocated to Major Titles**  
*Data from USDA Economic Research Service using Congressional Budget Office Estimates*



As a result of the recession, more Americans have relied on the SNAP program and the Nutrition Title's share of Farm Bill program spending has increased to more than 70% of the total. The cost of the Commodity Title has been lower than anticipated because the prices for many commodities have been above the levels that trigger some of the payments.

The 2008 Farm Bill increased USDA's conservation programs substantially and also expanded opportunities for fruit and vegetable producers; farmers transitioning to organic systems; and beginning, socially disadvantaged, and limited resource farmers. The larger Conservation Title has subsequently been trimmed by budget cuts in the years following passage of the Farm Bill. A few conservation programs as well as most renewable energy programs, some fruit and vegetable programs, some organic programs, and all the beginning and minority farmer programs have funding that currently expires after 2012.

Usually the Congressional Agriculture Committees use the existing Farm Bill as the starting point for developing the next Bill, but the budget and deficit reduction negotiations in summer 2011 include large proposed cuts to key agriculture programs that could have a significant impact on future policy and the funding available for the next Farm Bill.

## Conclusion

The next Farm Bill is scheduled for consideration in 2012, but Congressional hearings that will inform new policy have already begun. There are promising opportunities for forward movement on budget-neutral policies that support healthy foods. Also, there are opportunities to shift dollars from existing research, marketing, rural development, nutrition, and conservation programs to support healthier, sustainable food systems. Some of the programs with the largest potential impacts on public health and sustainable agriculture are threatened with elimination but advocates can play a critical role in defending them. Coalition-building efforts will also pay dividends over the long-term as the public health and sustainable agriculture communities pursue further transformation of federal farm and food policy.

### For Additional Information:

Read the [full report](http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org) on the Healthy Eating Research website ([www.healthyeatingresearch.org](http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org)).

*This summary was prepared by Kate Fitzgerald and Rebecca Klein for the Healthy Eating Research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.*

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<sup>i</sup> John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Center for a Livable Future (CLF) and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) health program staff represented the public health perspective for this project, and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) represented sustainable agriculture views.

<sup>ii</sup> Summary information about this conference is on the HER website:

<http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org/publications-mainmenu-111/proceedings-and-presentations-mainmenu-145/225-food-systems-and-public-health-linkages-to-achieve-healthier-diets-and-healthier-communities>

<sup>iii</sup> Additional sponsorship was provided by Kaiser Permanente, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Agriculture, University of Minnesota School of Public Health, Michigan State University College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.