

HOME NEWS TRIBUNE

EDITORIALS

[Get e-mail newsletters](#)

Lautenberg proposes a better farm bill

Home News Tribune Online 11/6/07

STORYCHAT: [Post a comment.](#) [View latest comments.](#)

Grant Frank Lautenberg this: Our 84-year-old senior U.S. senator has reached an age when the great scourge of representative democracy — public policy that panders to all and serves very few — has lost its hold on him. Last week, Lautenberg reached across the aisle to another veteran legislator to introduce groundbreaking farm-subsidy law.

Lautenberg and Republican Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, who is 75, deserve a great deal of credit for reworking the farm subsidy in a truly bold and visionary way, offering an alternative to the gargantuan status-quo farm bill slated for a vote in the Senate as early as this week. The only question is whether their effort has come too late. We all ought to hope not.

The farm bill — approved earlier this summer by the House — is the sort of confounding public policy document that too often wins approval in Washington; it's stuffed full of pork and misdirected at the same time. The bill would continue the decades-long practice of propping up certain agricultural crops at the expense of others — a practice, as critics note, that is not only unfair but unhealthy. The government payments send billions of dollars to Iowa, Illinois, Texas and several other Midwestern states that grow corn, wheat, soybeans and rice. The subsidies started as payments to prop up farmers when prices on those commodities fell. But the newest bill pays farmers regardless of prices, which are at record highs. In so doing, the government helps ensure that a bottle of Coke continues to cost less than a bottle of orange juice, that corn chips remain cheaper than a couple of apples.

The bill hurts places such as California, Florida and New Jersey, whose primary crops are fruits and vegetables. California, the nation's largest agricultural state, ranks only 12th on the list of farm-subsidy grants because more than 90 percent of its farmers don't qualify for subsidies. Florida is 36th on the list; New Jersey is 40th. It is slated to receive .1 percent of the total subsidy, compared to Iowa's 9.8 percent. In fact, according to Lautenberg and Lugar, under the bill, 6 percent of the nation's farms receive 70 percent of the money; many of those farms are among the richest in the nation.

Lautenberg and Lugar's bill, dubbed the FRESH Act, would get rid of that subsidy program. It would, instead, offer free insurance to all farmers, regardless of crop or farm size. The insurance, which is too expensive for most small farmers to afford, would reimburse farmers either when prices fall or their crops fail. There would be no ongoing payments without natural disasters or falling markets. Besides being more democratic, it also would be cheaper.

Lautenberg and Lugar, who is himself a family farmer, say there would be enough money left to greatly enhance the nation's Food Stamp Program and its other efforts to get cheap, healthy food to the poorest Americans. It would invest in conservation and in environmentally sound farming practices. It would help get fruits and vegetables more readily available to school lunch programs. It would help protect family farms and, by so doing, help protect rural counties from the threat of development. And, the sponsors say, there would still be \$3 billion left over to pay down the deficit.

The status-quo farm bill gains support through pork and special-interest politics; Lautenberg and Lugar's bill is gaining momentum among good-government groups on both sides of the aisle.

Of course, the very boldness of the plan works against it. Congress is a body accustomed to gradual change, when it accepts it at all. Hopefully, legislators will remember that the making of public policy is a great privilege

as well as a responsibility. Maybe then they can make laws that matter, truly serving the farmers and the people of the nation.

Subscribe Now! to the Home News Tribune. It's EZ.