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A FRESH and better farm bill

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Disappointed with the bipartisan, spendthrift ways of Congress? Horrified by the long-term deficit projections? Worried that Congress seems incapable of managing any mandatory entitlement program with any semblance of fiscal responsibility? Tired of the partisan rancor that has characterized congressional policy-making in recent years? Disturbed by the seeming inability of red state Republicans and blue state Democrats to collaborate for the common good? Frightened by the intensity of the internecine grass-roots warfare conducted over countless issues?

Well, meet Democratic Sen. Frank Lautenberg from the blue state of New Jersey along America's Eastern Seaboard and Republican Sen. Richard Lugar from the red state of Indiana in the nation's Midwest heartland. Joined by Republican co-sponsors Orrin Hatch of Utah and Susan Collins of Maine and Democrats Bob Menendez of New Jersey and Ben Cardin of Maryland, among others, Messrs. Lugar and Lautenberg have introduced a genuinely reform-oriented farm bill — the Farm, Ranch, Equity, Stewardship and Health (FRESH) Act of 2007 — that takes major steps in the right direction.

At the very moment that the mutually back-scratching, special-interest-dominated agriculture committees in both congressional chambers have reported terrible, business-as-usual, five-year agriculture-reauthorization measures, the Lugar-Lautenberg FRESH alternative is truly a breath of fresh air. Its common-sense priorities are so striking that the only sharp elbows exchanged between liberal and conservative interest groups are the ones necessary to get to the front of the line to be the first to embrace Lugar-Lautenberg. When left-of-center Environmental Defense, Environmental Working Group and the National Urban League join right-of-center Club for Growth, Council for Citizens Against Government Waste and the National Taxpayers Union to hail Lugar-Lautenberg, you realize just how special the FRESH Act must be.

Thomas Schatz, president of the government-waste organization, "applaud[ed]" the FRESH Act because it "would replace Depression-era farm-subsidy programs with programs that would provide a real safety net for farmers when they need it instead of doling out excessive payments to the wealthiest farmers whether they need them or not."

Said Tim Male, senior scientist at Environmental Defense: "Supporters of current crop subsidies always talk about helping small farms, but the FRESH Act is the only bill that actually walks the walk. By offering revenue insurance to all farmers — no matter what they grow — the FRESH Act would end the current unfair policy of picking favorites among crops and farmers."

FRESH Act would replace a complicated menu of "price triggers," "loan targets" and automatic "direct payments" with a safety net to all commodity-crop farmers that would mitigate the real-world risks that farmers cannot anticipate, including drought and floods. Commodity-crop farmers would not receive payments when "harvests and markets are strong." Unlike the current system, which, according to former Agriculture Committee Chairman Lugar, funneled more than 70 percent (\$120 billion) in crop subsidies over the past decade to 6 percent of the farms (even when farm incomes reached record levels), the FRESH Act would provide government-paid insurance policies to the majority of farmers who do not qualify for crop-subsidy programs. These specialty-crop (fruits, vegetables, some livestock and dairy) farmers would receive insurance-provided, safety-net payments whenever a farmer's revenue falls by 20 percent or more from his five-year average.

FRESH Act would do much less to distort international markets. It would also be far more trade-friendly than current subsidy policies, which have wreaked havoc in world trade negotiations, depriving all American consumers of huge benefits from increased trade liberalization. Moreover, the additional water-conservation benefits provided by the FRESH Act will mitigate the water problems that are guaranteed to intensify around the country in the years ahead. If this were not enough, the FRESH Act even makes a token contribution to deficit reduction, taking a step (albeit a small one) in the right direction.
