

# The Sacramento Bee

## Farm bill should focus on healthful foods

**By Alice Waters - Special to The Bee**  
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BERKELEY -- For every kid who eats lunch in a school cafeteria, there's a parent somewhere wishing the cafeteria would serve more fresh fruits and vegetables. But not many parents know about one of the most important pieces of legislation in Congress that influences what types of food farmers will grow and our families will eat. It's called the farm bill. Michael Pollan, a University of California, Berkeley, professor and author, says we should call it the "food bill" because it sets the direction of the American food system by singling out which crops the U.S. government will subsidize with billions of taxpayers' dollars. Every five to seven years Congress reauthorizes the farm bill, and luckily for us, this is one of those years. We have a rare opportunity to rethink what foods our tax dollars should support, and therefore which crops are cheap and superabundant, by standing up as food citizens and voting with our forks.

The farm bill emerged originally to support farmers during the Great Depression. But over time, it has turned into a system of subsidies heavily favoring five crops: corn, cotton, rice, soybeans and wheat. Between 1995 and 2003, farmers who grew these commodity crops received an average of \$14.5 billion in subsidies each year, half of which goes to a handful of states. By contrast, the farm bill offers little, if any, support to the California farmers who produce nearly half of our nation's fruits, nuts and vegetables, despite the U.S. Department of Agriculture's nutritional guidelines calling for a diet rich in all three. The subsidies result in a constant market glut of cheap corn and soybeans in their most highly processed forms: high-fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated fats. A more obvious result is the unnaturally low prices we see on the calorie-dense and nutritionally deficient foods that these ingredients make so cheap to produce.

Between 1985 and 2000, the price of sugary and high-fat foods declined by nearly 25 percent, while the cost of fruits and vegetables grew by almost 40 percent, according to the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Many public school districts operate on a shoestring budget, and the cheaper, unhealthful foods laden with sugar and hydrogenated fats have become staples of school lunch programs. For many low-income children school lunches offer the only meal some kids eat all day. As we know, a diet heavy with saturated fats and refined sugars has helped create a national pandemic of childhood obesity and diabetes. If previous farm bills had been healthful food bills, we would have subsidized nutritious foods instead of junk foods, and made nutritious foods more affordable and more available in schools.

Healthful food can find its way into public school districts. In Berkeley, the Edible Schoolyard, a school-based cooking and gardening project supported by the Chez Panisse Foundation, has been thriving for 10 years. The project teaches children healthy habits by showing them how to grow and prepare nourishing food, and how to share healthful meals with their classmates and families. Two years ago, with the help of another Chez Panisse Foundation grant, the Berkeley Unified School District

was able to hire Ann Cooper as its food service director to transition all 16 of its school cafeterias toward a new system. Cooper relies on healthful, locally produced foods, and on integrated cooking and gardening programs. Most of the school food is made from scratch, and fresh fruits and vegetables are available at every meal.

There is a groundswell of support across California, and across the country, for funding to create and significantly expand programs like these, which would make local and healthful foods more widely available in our schools and in low-income communities. Earlier this month, half of California's Congressional delegation joined together to urge the House Agricultural Committee for major reforms in the farm bill that increase access to high-quality, fresh foods for all Americans, support family farms, promote local food systems and protect our environment. The mayors of 12 cities, including San Francisco, Chicago, Des Moines, Miami and New York City, also called for investment in these priorities in a resolution unanimously adopted at the U.S. Conference of Mayors recently. In addition, several bills under consideration as part of the overall farm bill, most notably those introduced by Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., and by Sens. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, and Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., support nutrition education and expand the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable and Farm-to-School Cafeteria programs, which provide local produce as part of school meals.

While many key farm groups, legislators and the White House have called for serious reprioritization of farm bill funding to support these efforts, unfortunately the House Agriculture Subcommittee recently voted to extend current commodity crop subsidies. We now have a short and critical window of opportunity to make our voices heard before the full House Agriculture Committee convenes this week and sets our farm and food policy for the next five years. If the full panel does not enact substantive commodity reform and fund programs that could make a real difference in what we eat, we will continue down this unfortunate path.

We must demand a seismic shift in priorities away from commodity crops that contribute to childhood health-related diseases by asking that our tax dollars be used to increase the availability of healthful and fresh foods, while promoting markets for local and sustainable farmers. Now more than ever, we have the opportunity to create urban-rural partnerships that support sustainable agriculture and link California's specialty crop growers with the need for more nutritious food in our schools and communities. But this will only happen if we urge our legislators to stand up for a new and very different "Food and Farm Bill."