

This Farm Bill Really Matters. We Explain Why.

As communities struggle with food insecurity and farmers face a range of climate-fueled disasters, lawmakers have a chance to build a farm bill that tackles both in 2023. Will they?

BY LISA HELD MARCH 20, 2023



Illustrations by Nhatt Nichols.

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In Wichita, Kansas, Donna Pearson McClish, founder of Common Ground Producers and Growers, uses a “mobile food hub” model to move fresh food from local farms—both urban and rural—to low-income residents. Many use Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and market vouchers to stretch their dollars, she explained at the “Food Not Feed Summit” in early February.

In 2020, Common Ground received just under \$300,000 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to train entrepreneurs to grow and distribute food in low-income areas. In 2022, the organization partnered with the Kansas Rural Center to create a bigger food hub that will distribute local food in 12 counties along the interstate that runs from Wichita to Salina. That project will be funded by a larger \$500,000 USDA grant.

These efforts to feed people and distribute more local food in small but impactful ways are important to the state’s food system, yet they’re dwarfed by the scale of commodity farming in Kansas. In fact, between 1995 and 2021, the USDA also sent more than \$15 billion to wheat, sorghum, and corn farmers to continue producing commodities and \$3 billion in payments to encourage conservation practices on those same farms.

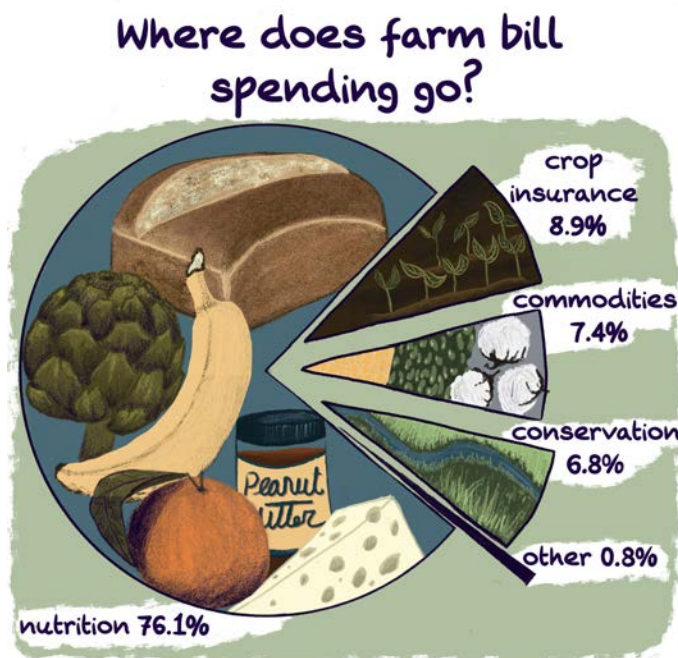
This funding—and the system it shapes—is determined by the federal farm bill, authorized by Congress every five years. Now, D.C. is abuzz with the start of 2023 negotiations, and Pearson McClish is one of many farmers and food advocates who are clamoring for change. At the summit, she likened the food system to critical infrastructure such as bridges and roads. “Food has to be a policy issue, not a profit issue,” she said.



Over the course of this year, Civil Eats will report on a number of specific aspects of this important legislation. For starters, here’s an overview of the 2023 Farm Bill.

What Is the Farm Bill?

The enormous bill, which the Congressional Budget Office predicts will cost about \$700 billion over the next five years, is about both policy and profit. Depending on the year, the super-sized spending bill consists of about a dozen sections, called titles. The largest titles authorize spending on SNAP benefits, subsidy payments for commodity farmers, crop insurance, and conservation programs.



Agriculture Committees in the House and Senate hold hearings, negotiate, and then write drafts of the bill that eventually need to be reconciled into one. Usually, the bill is referred to as “zero sum,” which means lawmakers have a set amount of money to work with. That can lead to tense negotiations, especially now, when Democrats control the Senate and Republicans control the House, with new procedural rules demanded by a group of far-right lawmakers.

What Will This Year’s Process Look Like?

Some past farm bill cycles have taken years, and some think this one will, too. But many insiders say the evidence points toward swift negotiations and passage. GOP lawmakers typically spend time advocating for cuts to SNAP and stringent work requirements—and that effort has already begun—but newly appointed House Agriculture Chairman G.T. Thompson (R-Pennsylvania) has pushed back on some of his fellow Republicans’ rhetoric and expressed openness to climate-ag programs he once railed against.

Meanwhile, veteran Senate Agriculture Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow announced that she will not seek reelection next year; with this as her last farm bill cycle, she will likely up the ante on passing a farm bill that cements her legacy.

“She’s going to do everything in her power—and she has a lot of power—to try to get it done,” said Ferd Hoefner, an agricultural policy strategist and consultant who has worked on nine previous farm bills. And the leadership recently announced that drafts of marker bills, the small bills that are used to create language to be added to the larger package, are due in mid-March (although that deadline may be extended).

Whatever happens politically, it's worth understanding what's at stake beyond the negotiations and lobbying in D.C., and what the outcome of this policy process could mean for farmers and eaters alike, especially at a time when the climate crisis and food insecurity are both urgent issues.

Will the Farm Bill's Hunger Provisions Meet the Growing Need?

For the past month, food pantries in many parts of the country have been rushing to prepare for what they anticipate will be a surge in demand. After a dip in 2021, the number of families who reported “sometimes” or “often” not having enough to eat rose gradually throughout 2022. Now, pandemic-related bumps in SNAP benefits have officially ended, with food prices still much higher than normal.

Meanwhile, in Washington, Senator John Boozman (R-Arkansas), the highest-ranking Republican on the Senate Agriculture Committee, began the first hearing on nutrition programs in the 2023 Farm Bill by chiding the USDA for its 2021 update to the Thrifty Food Plan, which increased benefits based on the rise in food prices over time. It's the one recent increase that won't expire, but Boozman said it brought SNAP spending up to “levels that are unsustainable.”

In the coming months, that tension between not enough and too much aid for hungry Americans will almost certainly resurface: Hunger groups will be fighting for expansions to SNAP that Democrats generally support, while many Republicans will sound alarms about the current cost and push for stricter eligibility requirements. Last week, House Republicans introduced their first bill which would make more SNAP recipients subject to work requirements.

SNAP is the largest program authorized by the farm bill, and it is expensive: In 2018, it accounted for 75 percent of the projected \$428 billion in farm bill spending between 2019 and 2023, and the Congressional Budget Office recently estimated costs will rise 8.4 percent over the next 10 years. But SNAP's proportion of the farm bill pie is so large because 40 million people participate annually.

By comparison, commodity programs receive 7 percent of funding, but over the past five years only served an average of 850,000 farmers each year. Average commodity payments are in the tens of thousands of dollars, and some farms get them continuously for decades. A recent EWG analysis found one subset of larger farms had each received tens of millions of dollars since 1985.

In the last few farm bill cycles, hunger groups focused on defending against cuts to SNAP, said Gina Plata-Nino, deputy director of SNAP at the Food Research Action Center (FRAC). This time around, especially since the pandemic exposed how close many people were living to the edge, she said, they want to do more. “This isn’t 2018. Our economy is not the same, and there are ways that people were impacted. We need to do better.”



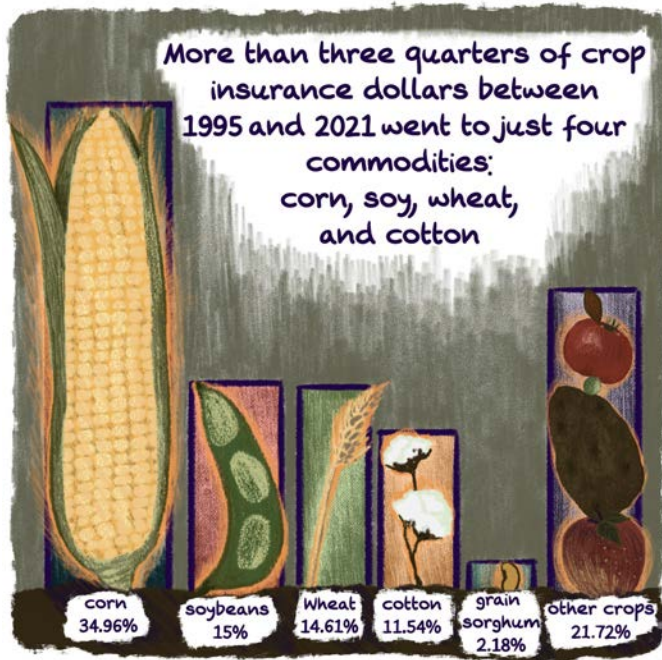
At the end of February, a coalition of 500 hunger and nutrition groups, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and the American Heart Association, released its 2023 farm bill priorities. Its members say lawmakers should protect the Thrifty Food Plan update and expand eligibility for college students, veterans, and seniors.

Will Farm Subsidies Continue to Flow to the Largest Farms?

Commodity programs are the most straightforward form of “subsidies” in the farm bill. When the price of one of the handful of eligible commodity crops—corn, soy, wheat, cotton, rice, etc.—drops below a certain threshold, farmers receive a payment based on a formula. The system was meant to secure the food supply, so that farmers don’t give up planting crops when prices drop.

Progressive groups like Farm Action and EWG have been hosting events like the Food Not Feed Summit to call attention to how commodity payments mainly subsidize crops that end up as animal feed, while also releasing data on how much of the money goes to large farms in lump sums.

During the first Senate hearing on commodity programs, Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa)—a farm policy veteran who wields special influence due to his home state and seniority—used his time to lament the fact that the largest 10 percent of farmers receive the bulk of the money. That, he said, drives up land prices and prevents young and beginning farmers from accessing land, which is why he proposed “common sense” payment limits in 2018.



“Instead, the previous farm bill was intentionally written to help the wealthiest farmers—even relatives with no direct connection to the land—receive unlimited subsidies from taxpayers,” he said, referencing a rule that was expanded in 2018 that allows more family members to claim they are “actively engaged” in farming, allowing multiple payments to single farms.

But Grassley is an outlier on the issue, and despite the rhetoric, for many reasons—including the power of the agricultural lobby—commodity programs are unlikely to change

much. Crop insurance, on the other hand, is getting more attention than ever, and there is more momentum in D.C. toward change. After the last farm bill cycle, crop insurance surpassed commodity payments in spending for the first time.

Republican leaders like Thompson want to make it even stronger for farmers who are facing increasing losses due to climate change. And many groups support crop insurance reforms that would make it easier for more kinds of farms to get coverage. While 85 percent of corn, soybean, wheat, and cotton acres are covered by crop insurance policies, very few fruit and vegetable, diversified, and organic farms receive coverage.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC), which represents farm groups ranging from centrist to more progressive, has laid out a farm bill platform including reforms that would make crop insurance more accessible to those farmers. Its members especially want to make improvements to a kind of insurance that covers whole farms, rather than specific crops, and should work better for smaller, diversified farms that tend to operate within local markets.

Finally, many policymakers and advocates are talking about ways to reward producers who use climate-smart and other environmentally friendly practices, since those practices could reduce the need for insurance. In late February, the Food and Climate Agriculture Alliance (FACA)—whose members include the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Corn Growers’ Association, and several other agricultural groups that represent larger growers—announced its 2023 farm bill priorities. FACA’s

platform proposes studying the relationship between crop insurance and climate-smart programs, while NSAC wants to stop crop insurance providers from penalizing farmers who are using conservation practices that might affect their immediate yields, among other reforms.

Can Farm Bill Conservation Programs Address the Climate Crisis?

While crop insurance could be linked to conservation for the first time this year, the farm bill has included stand-alone farm conservation programs since 1985. Today, the big three—the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)—account for 7 percent of spending.

At Open Book Farm in Middletown, Maryland, Mary Kathryn and Andrew Barnet used EQIP funding to plant pastures, install fencing, and build hoop houses as they transitioned a conventional dairy farm to a diversified operation with organic vegetable production and grazing animals. They used CRP funds to plant a buffer strip of trees and shrubs along their stream.

Those types of practices can provide a wide range of benefits, from preventing the pollution of waterways to improving air quality and providing pollinator habitat. But during this cycle, climate will be at the center of nearly every conversation on conservation. When Congress passed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), it included a \$20 billion bonus fund for conservation programs, specifically for climate-smart practices over the next five years. The USDA has already started rolling out that funding, but questions remain as to how it will play a role in the farm bill process.

Nearly every farm group and food company has begun pushing a climate message, and their tone has built in urgency—for good reason.

“Eventually, [climate] just becomes part of the landscape,” Hoefner said. For example, FACA’s platform included support for keeping IRA funding focused on climate, along with other recommendations to prioritize climate-smart practices within conservation programs.



However, when NSAC's member groups from around the country descended on D.C. for the "Farmers for Climate Action" rally on March 7, some of their demands were very different. NSAC's members want to see lawmakers make it harder for concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) to get conservation funding, for example, so more dollars go to the grazing systems they see as inherently more climate-friendly. They also want to secure more stringent payment limits in EQIP and CSP so that more, smaller payments can be made to smaller farms.

NSAC's members have also been big supporters of Congresswoman Chellie Pingree's (D-Maine) Agriculture Resilience Act, a marker bill she plans to reintroduce soon.

Will the Arc of History Bend Toward Localized Food Systems?

In January, 4P Foods founder Tom McDougall took the stage at Future Harvest's annual conference. The room was filled with Mid-Atlantic farmers, many young and from diverse backgrounds, growing vegetables and grains and grazing livestock for their regional markets. Two decades ago, the farm bill didn't include anything that would have benefited them.

Now, McDougall was there to talk about how 4P has used a Regional Food Systems Partnership (RFSP) grant of close to \$1 million from the USDA to bring together a dozen local organizations to begin scaling up the area's food system, with new trucks on the road, infrastructure, and technical assistance for growers and food hubs. "Can we demonstrate that we can create . . . a scalable and replicable model to transport local food around the region?" he asked the farmers, inviting their participation.



RFSP was created as a new offering under the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP), newly formed by the 2018 Farm Bill to create an umbrella for local food programs. By creating that umbrella for the popular Value-Added Producer Grants, the Farmers Market Promotion Program, and RFSP, policymakers guaranteed permanent funding for all of the programs. It's one example of how within small titles like Horticulture and Miscellaneous, the farm bill has slowly begun to impact some growers outside the commodity system.

Since 2021, the Biden administration has also used money from the series of pandemic, infrastructure, and climate bills passed to boost funding for local and regional agriculture in several ways. “Those [grants] are one and done, unless something happens in this farm bill to carry it forward,” Hoefner said.

And there’s good reason to think something will happen. For example, the USDA gave hundreds of millions of dollars to small-scale meat processors to expand capacity for smaller livestock operations over the last two years. And on February 8, a bipartisan group of lawmakers reintroduced the Strengthening Local Processing Act, a marker bill that would provide more permanent support to local meat processors. Similarly, last August, the USDA announced it would invest \$300 million of American Rescue Plan funding into helping more farmers transition to organic production. Now, organic advocacy groups are pushing to codify that program in the upcoming farm bill.

Other groups in this realm will also be looking to build on previous wins. Lawmakers combined the 2501 program, which provides assistance to underserved farmers, with a program that helps young and beginning farmers to create the Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach (FOTO) program to secure more funding in 2018. Groups including the National Young Farmers Coalition are asking lawmakers to continue to fund and expand opportunities within FOTO, while also pushing for the creation of a new program that would invest \$2.5 billion into land access for young farmers.

Meanwhile, tribal agriculture advocates are pushing to increase funding for the Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program from \$3 million to \$30 million. That may sound like a big jump, but in the context of the farm bill, it’s a drop in the bucket.

In the end, the farm bill funding going toward SNAP, commodity funds, and crop insurance will continue to dwarf everything else. And that fact can make it seem like the policy will generally support a business-as-usual approach to the food system. But Hoefner said that when you take the long view, it’s easy to see that the policies have evolved in incredibly impactful ways over time.

Funding for projects like building regional food systems and assisting beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers wasn’t even on the table until the mid-‘90s; and conservation, which now accounts for \$6 billion in spending each year, didn’t enter the picture until the mid-‘80s. “Whether you’re talking about Value-Added Producer Grants or socially disadvantaged farmers or specialty crop block grants,” he said, “these are real dollars having real effects.”

Over the next several months, as negotiations progress, the picture of how this farm bill is likely to affect farmers and eaters for the next five years—and longer—will gradually come into focus.



Lisa Held is Civil Eats' senior staff reporter. Since 2015, she has reported on agriculture and the food system with an eye toward sustainability, equality, and health, and her stories have appeared in publications including *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, and *Mother Jones*. In the past, she covered health and wellness and was an editor at Well+Good. She is based in Baltimore and has a master's degree from Columbia University's School of Journalism. [Read more >](#)

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