

Farm Bill and Local Farms

Presented by Class XIII of the Hawai'i Agriculture Leadership Program

The Farm Bill covers a wide range of topics, including payments to farmers to support the prices for crops, nutrition programs such as food stamps, international trade, conservation, and energy. The legislation is authorized every five years by the Federal Government with the next authorization to occur in 2012. The Farm Bill is important, but can do much more to help Hawai'i. More support for "specialty crops," environmental stewardship, food safety initiatives, and support for new farmers should be included in the bill to better represent Hawai'i's unique industries.

Create a More Resilient American Food and Agriculture System

Each year, the federal government makes payments of more than 10 billion dollars to commodity farmers (primarily covering corn, wheat, soybeans, cotton, rice, sorghum, peanuts and barley) that are intended to help provide growers an economic safety-net. However, because Hawai'i's farmers commercially grow none of these crops, these subsidies instead create market distortions and adverse environmental impacts for farmers in our state. Reevaluating which crops are grown around the country - not just in the "heartland" of America - would help build a thriving diversified agricultural system instead of a narrow industry dominated by large corporate farms.

Increasing support for "specialty crop" programs such as the "Specialty Crop Block Grant Program" would provide support to a diversified agriculture system on a competitive basis instead of subsidizing a monoculture-based food system. With cities and states across the country entering a local food renaissance, now is a critical time to support community food projects. With historically only 1-3 percent of agricultural subsidies used for these types of initiatives, it's time to re-evaluate where our food dollars are spent.

Advancing Environmental Stewardship and Food Safety

Farmers and ranchers are under increasing pressure from both consumers and regulators to address environmental concerns, while at the same time, face record demand from world food markets. In order to grow and prosper, agriculture must meet this demand while also protecting the environment on large and small scales—a tall order. The Farm Bill is a key source of support for farmers' and ranchers' environmental stewardship, but conservation program funding has already been targeted for budget cuts.

The 2012 Farm Bill must reaffirm the importance of environmental stewardship and do more with less—improving the cost-effectiveness of the conservation programs, making it easier for farmers to adopt environmentally sound practices, and promoting new income streams like ecosystem service markets. Broad federal guidelines must be flexible so local administrations such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can adapt them to meet the diverse needs of local areas. Environmental practices, methods of farming, and reimbursement packages must reflect local conditions.

New Farmers and Ranchers

The farm bill must ensure support in two key areas; technology/innovation, and federally supported private/public education programs. Strong educated farmers are critical to maintaining food stability in Hawai'i, and with the average age of the Hawai'i farmer at 61, there is an even more pressing need to ensure we are growing a new supply of local farmers. Funding for expanded training for local farmers must be a priority in the 2012 Farm bill.

Solar off grid technology, aquaponics, traditional farming practices, and forestry/ranching on the same property are just a few of the innovative strategies that can move American farms and ranches forward in the global market. Federal partners must fund projects like these that focus on alternative strategies that lower costs by integrating technology and sustainable management plans. Other countries can operate at lower cost where labor does not impact the bottom line, but only through innovation and technology can our farmers receive high salaries and remain competitive in a global market.