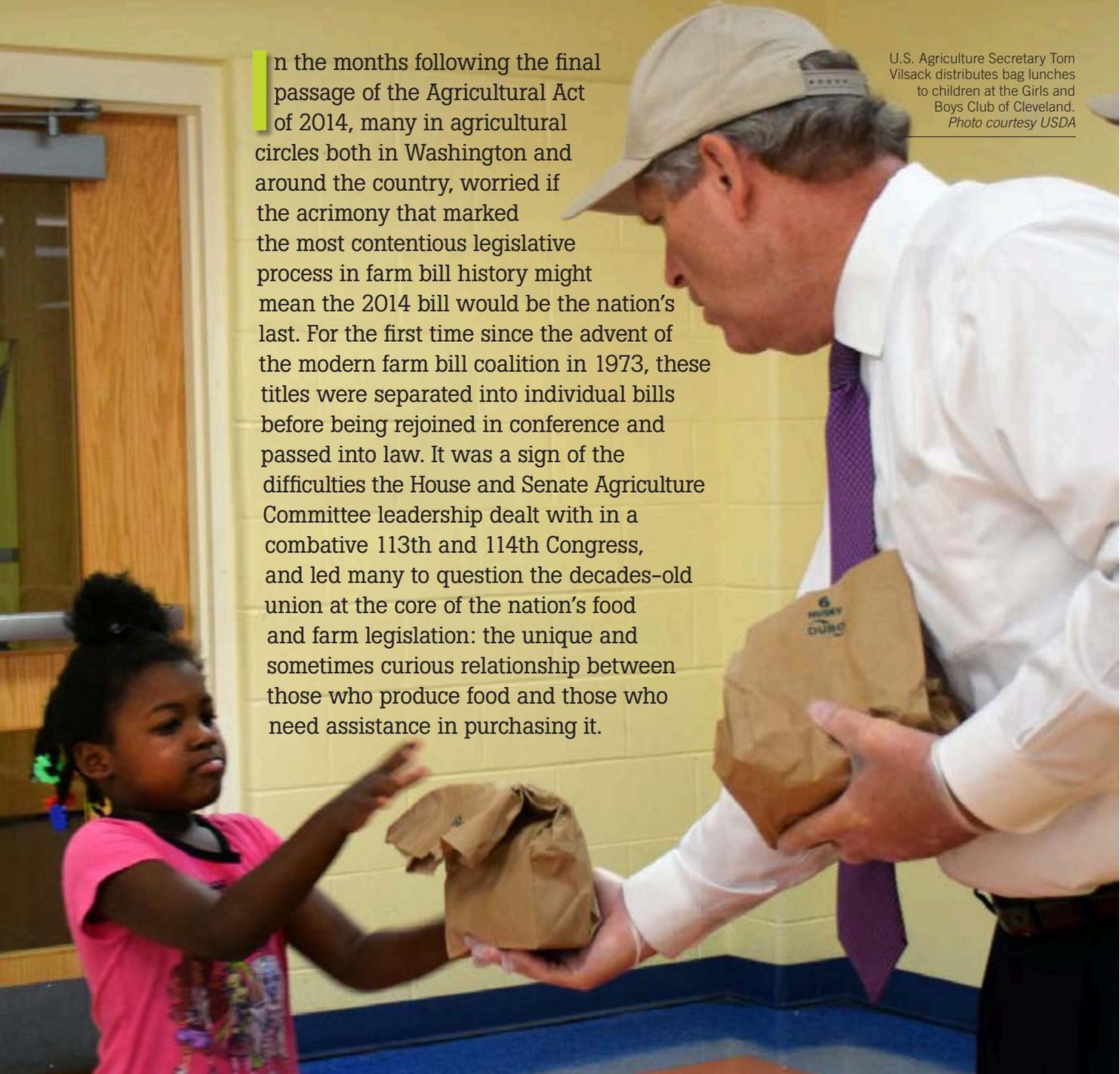


# FARM TO TABLE:

## Hunger, Nutrition and Farm Programs in the Farm Bill

In the months following the final passage of the Agricultural Act of 2014, many in agricultural circles both in Washington and around the country, worried if the acrimony that marked the most contentious legislative process in farm bill history might mean the 2014 bill would be the nation's last. For the first time since the advent of the modern farm bill coalition in 1973, these titles were separated into individual bills before being rejoined in conference and passed into law. It was a sign of the difficulties the House and Senate Agriculture Committee leadership dealt with in a combative 113th and 114th Congress, and led many to question the decades-old union at the core of the nation's food and farm legislation: the unique and sometimes curious relationship between those who produce food and those who need assistance in purchasing it.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack distributes bag lunches to children at the Girls and Boys Club of Cleveland.  
*Photo courtesy USDA*



| By **Patrick Delaney**

The history of the farm and food partnership goes back more than three-quarters of a century to the Great Depression. In an effort to assist the unemployed in purchasing food, and aid in the distribution of surplus farm commodities, Congress authorized the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation in the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933.

As the nation emerged from the Depression in 1939, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Henry Wallace and President Franklin Roosevelt established the Food Stamps Plan, which provided low-income Americans with vouchers to purchase foods in surplus. That program continued through and after World War II, and was formally codified in the Food Stamp Act of 1964.

The act also marked establishment of a political partnership between urban and rural interests. At the time the act was introduced, House leaders were also debating a bill to benefit cotton and wheat farmers that needed votes to pass that chamber. Leadership paired the two measures together, drawing urban support for the cotton and wheat bill, and lending rural support to the Food Stamp Act.

"We had great trouble passing farm legislation at that time," recalled former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, then a member of the House Agriculture Committee representing Kansas' "Big First" Congressional District. "Combining the two was an act of necessity, and it enabled us to pull in Democratic votes from members who would not ordinarily support farm-specific issues. Since then, the marriage has continued."

According to University of Illinois professor Jonathan Coppess, one must look at the changing dynamics of the country at the time to appreciate these developments. Coppess, who worked on the 2008 and 2014 farm bills, suggested that while much has been made of the migration of rural to urban and suburban areas and the

corresponding reduction in rural congressional districts, this trend accelerated in the post-WWII boom of the 1950s and '60s, which served to weaken the rural vote, particularly in the House. The large migration of African-Americans out of the Jim Crow south to northern cities also contributed to the marked decrease in exclusively rural congressional districts. Finally, according to Coppess, the holdover Depression-era farm policy of the time based on the parity concept that coupled price supporting loans with acreage controls, was falling apart. That led to production of massive commodity surpluses and an extremely difficult environment in which to defend farm programs.

It would be another nine years before the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act formally paired federal farm and nutrition programs in 1973. For the forty years and eight farm bills that followed, until the debate on what became the 2014 farm bill, the agricultural and hunger and nutrition communities coexisted relatively untested.

Today, it is a relationship that some malign as all-too-characteristic of Washington horse-trading. But, said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, the cooperation between urban and rural constituencies in the farm bill and on other issues reflects its core purpose.

"The nature of a farm bill is to provide support for America's farmers in terms of being able to promote new market opportunities, to expand existing markets, to help create demand for the products American farmers produce so that prices remain stable and farmers can stay profitable," Vilsack said.

Pointing to the food stamp program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Vilsack noted that, "Part of what SNAP does is it enables people to go into grocery stores and purchase more. Currently, more than 43 million Americans are enrolled in the SNAP



A World War II-era poster from USDA explains the connection between food stamps and agricultural surplus. Photo courtesy USDA, National Agriculture Library

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program and through it are able to purchase more food than they otherwise could. That of course creates greater demand.”

Senate Agriculture Committee Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow of Michigan said the farm bill creates a connection based on mutual need and protection by setting up backstops against tough times for both farmers and consumers.

“We’ve purposely put programs in place to support farmers when there’s a downturn, just as we’ve put them in place to support families in the same situation,” Stabenow said.

Vilsack added that redemption of SNAP benefits boosts economic activity at all points along the supply chain.

“The more food SNAP recipients purchase, the more has to be packed, processed, shipped, trucked and ultimately produced,” he said “SNAP creates an additional level of support just in the same way we promote exports, in the way we have the Commodity Credit Corporation to purchase surplus product to stabilize prices, and just in the way that we now have risk management payments in the form of the Agricultural Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) programs. It’s part of a strategy to make sure there is continued demand for whatever it is American farmers are producing.”

But there are some who would like to see the bill split into two separate parts: a nutrition bill and a farm program bill. That approach, said Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts of Kansas, misses the mark.

“Instead of having conversations about splitting the farm bill and dividing nutrition and agriculture programs we should focus our



Senate Agriculture Committee Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow, left, and Chairman Pat Roberts, right, during a hearing on the implementation of the 2014 Farm Bill. Photo courtesy USDA

energies on reviewing what works and what doesn’t, and then advance reforms that work for the entire agriculture and food value chain,” Roberts said.

To Roberts, that whole-chain approach represented by the partnership between farmers and the anti-hunger community is critical to connecting with lawmakers and eventually moving the next farm bill.

“As soybean farmers know, the number of folks producing food is far less than the number of folks consuming food. That disproportion is reflected in what some members of Congress hear from constituents,” Roberts said. “However, these constituencies are tied to one another, so lawmakers have to find ways to reach across the aisle and throughout the value chain to move a farm bill across the finish line and to the President’s desk.”

Fellow Kansan Dole agreed. “Aggies need to expand our coverage,” he said. “So many that live in cities go into the grocery store and grab a box of cornflakes without a thought as to how that box actually got there.

Farmers need to better explain how they prepare the land, plant the seed, watch it grow and hope for no damaging conditions, then how they harvest, process and transport it. But more importantly, farmers need to explain how this is done at a very low cost, and how that in turn keeps food affordable for consumers. Food is at its most affordable in the United States because of the effectiveness of American farmers.”

The key to ensuring passage of a farm bill is finding a way for farmers to connect with consumers in the urban and suburban areas that carry proportionately greater representation in Congress.

Vilsack said the partnership between urban and rural needs to be strengthened as the farm bill has a very wide scope. “It’s not just a farm bill, it’s a jobs bill, it’s a research bill, it’s an energy bill, it’s a forest bill, it’s a conservation bill, it’s a nutrition bill,” he said. “The result of which is that you can build a very strong coalition of supporters if you’re smart about it.”

Roberts said farmers also need to do a

better job connecting with lawmakers and explaining their practices.

"I commend the many soybean farmers who participate in the legislative process," he said. "We need more folks speaking to their elected officials and to consumers about the importance of and the struggles associated with production agriculture."

Many of the American Soybean Association's (ASA) state affiliates have created programs that foster this connection at the local level.

The "Soy in the City" program—a collaboration between the Illinois Soybean Association and the Illinois Pork Producers Association—donated 800 pounds of ground pork to the Bloom Township Food Pantry in Chicago Heights. The Missouri Soybean Association works alongside the CommonGround program to hold educational dinners on a working dairy farm with local health and nutrition professionals in urban and suburban Kansas City. The Nebraska Soybean Board's Bean Team organizes consumer outreach through interactive displays on the health

benefits of soy foods in grocery stores in urban Lincoln and Omaha. The Alabama Soybean Producers donated \$5,000—which Feeding America matched through its Invest an Acre initiative—to the Alabama Food Bank Association. In the Glass Barn, an award-winning interactive learning tool developed by the Indiana Corn Growers Association and Indiana Soybean Alliance, visitors to the Indiana State Fair in Indianapolis can see, through a virtual grocery store aisle, which products in the aisle contain soybeans and corn, and how they help to keep food affordable.

At the national level, ASA and Feeding America lead an effort of the nation's agriculture and anti-hunger and nutrition groups to put farm and food policy advocates at the same table—to foster collaboration and constructive discussions leading to the next farm bill.

Still, the threat of splitting the farm bill persists, as spending-hawks look to target the federal farm and nutrition programs they view to be prime examples of government spending run amok, while some in the agriculture

community look at nutrition programs as unrelated to the bill's intent and thus a barrier to its passage. That viewpoint, warned Vilsack and Dole, can have significant unintended consequences for farm programs.

"Some may be under the mistaken impression that if you were to separate the nutrition title from the rest of the bill it would make it easier to pass a farm bill, and would result in more money coming to farmers through other programs," Vilsack said. "That is a mistaken belief. First, because those resources would not stay within the farm program, but would be redirected to other priorities outside of the farm bill. And second, because you would have a much harder time securing the votes for crop insurance, margin protection programs, and things of that nature, if you were relying on a document that speaks only to rural interests and not those of urban and suburban communities as well."

Dole put it more bluntly. "If you take food stamps out of the farm bill, you're not going to pass a farm bill." ▣

## Rural Congressional Representation in Decline

The proportion of rural congressional districts is at its lowest point in American history, according to research conducted by the American Sugarbeet Growers Association. The research, which analyzed the most recent United States Census data, alongside data from the 2012 Census of Agriculture, shows only one of the 435 districts in the U.S. House of Representatives—Kentucky's fifth congressional district represented by House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers—is comprised of more than 75 percent rural population, and only another 33 districts have more than half of their populations in rural areas. The research defines rural as a community with 2,500 or fewer residents.

The percentage of Americans living in rural areas declined from more than 60 percent in 1900 to less than 20 percent in 2010, while the percentage of Americans living in major

metropolitan areas rose from more than 40 percent to approximately 80 percent over the same time period.

This issue is more impactful legislatively for soybean farmers, given that within the top 10 soybean producing states, there are only six majority-rural congressional districts, with Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota and Kansas lacking a single district defined as rural.

All is not lost for farmers and rural policy advocates, however. Research from political scientists Gerald Gamm and Thad Kousser shows that at the state level, lawmakers from smaller jurisdictions (less than 10,000 residents) are almost twice as likely to pass legislation than their counterparts from metropolitan areas with populations of more than 500,000. ▣