

New farm law needs big overhaul

It's heretical to suggest major revisions to the new farm law – officially known as H.R. 6124, the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 – which became law just three months ago. But our deepest interests are ill-served by allowing such backwards-looking federal policies to stand for the next five years, amid so much turmoil in the nation's food, energy, and economic sectors.

Normally, a few weeks (or months) after passage of major farm legislation, there are necessary minor, “technical corrections” laws passed – tidying up mistakes. **But this new farm law is SO bad, that we may fully expect to see major revisions under the face-saving guise of “technical corrections.”**

After many months of needless gridlock, delay, and committee turf wars, the 2007 farm bill process was presumed to have finally concluded in June 2008 — far behind schedule and way over budget. The biggest roadblocks to gaining rational federal farm policies: two Democrats who chair the Senate and House agriculture committees, respectively: Iowa Senator Tom Harkin and Minnesota Congressman Colin Peterson. The incompetence of this pair is exceeded only by: 1) the incompetence of their committee staffs, and 2) Harkin's and Peterson's allegiance to financial donations from big-money interests in agriculture and food. Simply put: the 2008 Farm Bill is the worst set of policies that old-line interests could buy, such as:

- * Continuing massive taxpayer subsidies of large farms at the expense of small and medium farms. Public support for any farm programs will evaporate, if federal farm spending is (correctly) perceived as “welfare checks” for factory farms and urban tax cheats.

- * Failing to revise federal milk marketing orders.

- * Failing to address issues of concentration in the marketing of agricultural products and consumer foods.

- * Creating a “special category” for dairy product importers, allowing importers to pay a fee for USDA's dairy promotion program equal to *HALF* the amount assessed U.S. dairy producers. Another bit of foolishness: foreign importers can ask for all their promotion funds back!

- * Ignoring the dire need to promote regional, sub-regional and local food production. Rising costs of growing and transporting food across the continent render our current food production model not sustainable.

- * Failing to wean this nation's food policies from an addiction to “Free Trade” that harms domestic food producers and consumers.

- * House agriculture committee staffers hid \$16 billion in costs from the public!

Higher, safer, saner ground

How to secure the profitability of this nation's food producers and sustain the nation's consumers' requisite sources of food and nutrition? Pardon the World War II parallels among these suggestions, but I believe the present threat to our national food security is as great as any economic or security threat this nation has faced in the past century!

- * **A “Manhattan Project”-type emphasis on producing as much food as possible on a regional, sub-regional and regional basis.** Currently, about 30% of this nation's food is produced in California's Central Valley (an irrigated desert far from the majority of the population). That's not sustainable. What's needed: producing as much food as possible, in regions of the country where the populations are highest and where the moisture comes down *au natural*. The Midwest, Northeast and Southeast are prime candidates for increased food production ... as California parches in what climate experts believe is a reversion to longer-term, drier conditions for our western states.

- * **“Victory Garden”-like programs encouraging citizens to raise part of their own food sup-**

plies, when and where possible. Food grown at home is money saved. Plus, urban consumers learn where their food comes from (not the supermarket) and develop a healthy respect for the sweat and expense involved in food production. Teach ‘em!

- * **Revised “visions” for foods and diets.** Americans must get used to eating different sources of meat and proteins, to compensate for shortages of beef, pork and poultry – production of which will decrease due to high grain costs. We must adopt to eating more alternate proteins – most efficiently, both from smaller creatures that obtain a major portion of their diet from grass ... as well as from plant sources.

- * **“Fence-Row Agriculture.”** It's time to boost what I call, “Fence-Row Agriculture.” On many farms, fence-rows are either an unmanaged array of junky trees and weeds, or barren waste areas maintained by herbicides. Rethink: the fence-row, or perimeter, is actually the longest “crop row” on the farm, if well managed.

Imagine: our farm fence-rows *managed* – within the vagaries of soil, climate and moisture – to produce a diversity of trees for energy, wind breaks, food (apples and other fruits, nuts, etc), smaller vegetation to grow berries ... and even ground-level plants like pumpkins and squash. Feed the pumpkins in the cold months to your chickens. An additional benefit: well-tended fence-rows with tiers of cover (high, medium and low) providing shelter for birds that eat bugs.

“Fence-Row Agriculture” represents one of this nation's greatest opportunities to expand the farm food/energy productivity without increasing overall acreage.

- * **“Agro-Energy” for small/medium farms.** Most federal programs for alternate energy production entail huge taxpayer subsidies paid to big utilities and oil companies. That's what's wrong with federal policies aimed at using farm resources to produce energy: everything's on a mega-scale that aces out the “average Joe and Jane.”

With federal subsidies, this nation needs multiple private efforts to develop and enhance on-farm production of energy: wind, methane, solar, etc. We need projects that can be applied to the 5-acre, 20-acre, and 40-acre patches, too!

Two examples:

- 1) Harvesting methane from ruminant manure. Virtually 100% of methane digesters for U.S. dairy farms are for big farms, and most methane digesters collect the gas to fuel diesel generators to produce electricity. What about the “little guys”? In India, for example, where the average dairy herd size is three (count ‘em, **3**) cows, many farms collect manure in upside-down, cone-shaped structures – where the manure decomposes and is flared – providing heat for the family's cooking and hot water. To Hades with methane digesters and diesel engines! Where's the research (and incentives) for small- and medium-sized dairy farmers to collect their manure in sealed storage units and use the flared gasses to heat hot water, nearby houses ... even a greenhouse (to produce local, winter-market vegetables)???

The “stink” of manure is, in truth, lost money ... on U.S. dairy farms.

- 2) Storing wind energy. Wind is a harvestable, non-depleting energy resource. However, neigh-



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bors' reasoned opposition to massive wind farms is brewing. Again, as with methane, where's the research being conducted for “small wind” – technology that would fit on small and medium farms?

Quite frankly: one of the biggest questions facing this nation on wind energy, regardless of scale, is how to *store* the energy. Critics always discount wind energy by saying, “You can't store it for when the wind isn't blowing.” Who sez?

We can store wind energy, at least on a small-scale basis, if we research solutions! Example: on our small farm, we are “blessed” with a 50' tall, poured concrete silo that remains from the days when this place was a dairy farm. I stare at that silo, wondering why it couldn't be filled with a hot dog-shaped bladder (made of rubber, like an inner tube for a truck tire). This “silo inner tube” could be filled with compressed air produced from wind energy captured by a small windmill mounted atop the silo. The compressed air could be released on an as-need basis, to perform a variety of tasks – from turning a propeller to generate electricity or to create other forms of kinetic energy through use of levers and pulleys.

Where are today's Thomas Edisons?

The energy and food crises that await our nation offer the greatest opportunities for small-scale tinkerers and inventors since electricity pioneer Thomas Edison's young days.

Turning to our farms into simultaneous producers of food and energy represents a great opportunity for rural residents to maintain their independence from the big corporations that control food/energy ... not to mention big government.

The realities facing the United States citizens – in terms of our future challenges of energy and food – are massive and stark.

Give American farmers and rural residents the facts ... challenge their inventiveness and will to survive ... and get out of the way! Squarely in the way of reasoned, future farm and food policies are the sorry likes of Tom Harkin and Collin Peterson – the best backwards-looking politicians that concentrated agribusiness-money can buy off. We need a reasoned, public debate over future food and energy opportunities ... to honestly sustain this nation.

Old politicians – custom-fitted with blinders by corporate agribusiness and energy giants – have totally failed to cast future federal food and agro-energy policies that will sustain this nation's citizens. If we follow the trail of federal farm/food/energy policies laid out by these paid-off politicians' latest handiwork (the 2007 farm law), hunger and failed energy opportunities await this once ... and potentially future ... great nation.