

Take integrated approach to a food-and-farm bill

The landscape of America's food system has shifted since Congress passed the 2002 farm bill. Except for growth in renewable energy, no set of issues offers more promise than increasing demand for healthful food.

Most evident are the growing markets for locally grown and organically labeled foods, but health concerns and the need to address obesity and diet-related illness create new issues for Congress to address. Recent episodes of contaminated food from China and the '06 E. coli scare contribute to consumer desires to know more about our food — where it is grown and how it is raised.

The Senate has the opportunity to write a true farm and food bill, addressing not just farm programs, food stamps and conservation, but also articulating a strategic, integrated approach to the relation between farming and food in rural America.

Here are some of the ideas the Senate should consider.

- Expand the fruit and vegetable snack program to cover additional states and schools — so more kids have access to fresh, nutritious food. Better yet, purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables so schools are connected to nearby farms

and the program supports local economies.

- Fund the specialty-crop block grants and give states flexibility to support innovative projects. Support ideas such as the "fresh checks" used in several states to provide food-assistance recipients with bonus checks to buy nutritious produce at farmers markets.



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- Implement the much-delayed COOL — country of origin labeling — program, and give consumers the information they want and need to make food choices. Making informed choices is a basic tenet of our democracy. Congress should end efforts to keep consumers in the dark on the origins of our food and what is in it.

- Allow the interstate shipment of state-inspected meat, done in ways that do not threaten consumer safety but do create opportunities for rural food businesses. Isn't it ironic that we accept shiploads of food with few inspections from China, a country with at best a rudimentary appreciation for the rule of law, but we bar meat produced here and inspected

by state employees from moving across state lines?

- Accelerate the move to organic food by supporting producers as they convert their farms and by funding the research critical to this form of production.

- Amend the popular value-added producer marketing grants to include cooperative efforts to process and market foods in regional food systems like the one Iowa has built over the last 10 years.

The key is whether we approach food and farm policy as an integrated whole or as unrelated blocks. The farm bill can't be food stamps in this jar, farm programs in another and conservation over here. All these issues are parts of a comprehensive policy — one that expands opportunities for farmers and food businesses; that gives consumers access to healthful foods and that addresses the nutrition needs of all citizens — kids, mothers and seniors.

Recognizing that all citizens deserve a healthful, nutritious diet — and delivering on that promise — should be the hallmark of a sustainable food-and-farm bill.

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