

## Restore the Farm Bill's 'Buy-Local' Mandate

It seems hard to believe at a time when parents are struggling to ensure that their kids can eat nutritious foods, and when stories about toxic imports are front-page news. But it's true: a federal bureaucracy, with the connivance of sneaky Senate staffers and global agribusiness, is throwing up new roadblocks to the purchase by schools of healthy local foods.

In recent years, a number of states have passed 'Farm to School' legislation, ensuring that local farms will find a reliable buyer for their bounty. Farm to School programs have helped kids develop the life-long eating habits that are the best defense against chronic illness.

Good for the economy, good for kids—it's the kind of legislation that causes people to ask, "why haven't we been doing this all along?"

But rather than applauding these efforts and leading the charge toward healthy foods, the United States Department of Agriculture made it very clear who their paymasters are.

Never mind that the United States has both some of the highest rates of malnutrition *and* obesity of any advanced industrial nation. The big food processors and grocery chains appreciated the use of the federal-agency hammer in keeping the industrial food-supply system humming along. USDA worked constantly to thwart this grassroots movement toward buying local and supporting the small-farm sector.

But six months ago, the agency finally got called out on its foot-dragging. The House and Senate both included language in their versions of the federal Farm Bill that encourages local purchasing preferences.

But a funny thing happened on the way to Conference Committee, where the two versions of the bill will be reconciled. Even though language on local purchasing preferences was identical in the House and Senate versions of the bill, USDA successfully inserted a provision watering down the 'buy-local' mandate.

This is outrageous. Local purchasing preferences help local farmers stay in business. They ensure that more of the tax dollars from a state stays in that state. Foods that are grown locally are fresher, safer, and have a much-reduced 'carbon footprint' as compared to apples or beef shipped from half way around the world.

But with the vertical integration of agribusiness conglomerates and the consolidation of marketing power into a few very large firms, the 'buy local' movement was seen as a palpable threat to 'business as usual.' It's quite a tribute to the power of agribusiness lobbyists that at the eleventh hour they could insert an amendment to overturn the popular version of the bill passed out of both houses of Congress.

This change should not stand. Congress needs to restore the local-purchasing preference

mandate to the federal Farm Bill in the conference committee. It needs to send a signal that states, cities, and school districts should be free to innovate in their food purchasing programs. And if USDA isn't willing to lead, then at the very least, this federal agency needs to get out of the way.

The clamor for food safety, and for improved food choices in schools, has risen to a deafening level. Congress heard it in drafting this new Farm Bill. But it fell on deaf ears over at USDA. And that's what most needs to change.

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