

## **The Farm Bill: A Bit of Background**

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The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 was the most recent of a line of periodic laws that provide authorization and regulations of a set of loosely-related government programs that are mostly administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). For decades these laws have been best known by their informal name of the “Farm Bill.” This began as a truly descriptive nickname back when the law dealt mostly with farm issues, but that has not been true for about half a century. For decades food and nutrition programs comprise the great bulk of the authorized spending and these programs are far removed from the farm.

U.S. farm and agricultural policy in what is now the United States dates back to the earliest colonial days when farming was the bulk of the economy. Farm policy during the early years of the republic often took the form of land and trade policies. Creation of the USDA, the Homestead Act, and the establishment of the formal agricultural research, education and extension systems all began during and soon after the Civil War. The farm credit system, legal support for cooperatives and periodic efforts to aid farms and rural areas all began in the early part of the 20th Century. However, the modern era of farm commodity subsidies, price regulations, crop insurance, storage programs, and soil conservation and environmental programs began during the massive increase in the active engagement of the federal government in the economy and especially with the New Deal that began in 1933.

Every few years for the next nine decades, these programs have been modified and renewed. The 2018 Farm Bill authorized programs and annual outlays as needed for those programs only for five years, until 2023, so the cycle continues this year.

A Farm Bill typically has many Titles, usually starting with Title I “Commodities,” which specifies the farm commodity subsidy programs and Title II “Conservation,” and continuing through “Trade,” “Nutrition,” and “Credit,” all the way to Title XII? “Miscellaneous.” We may see recent topics related to food safety, supply chains and farm animal treatment on farms become features of farm bill debate this time around. In 2018, Title VII was devoted to, “Research, Extension and Related Matters,” and authorized programs and federal funding for research and extension services that are integral to the mission of the University of

California. Many in California urge more for agricultural R&D as crucial for long run productivity and for improvement of environmental outcomes.

Commodity programs of Title I deals mostly with grains and oilseeds and most of the money goes to the Midwest and the south (but rice is a big crop in California that makes use of these programs. Horticulture, and crop insurance and dairy program provisions are of more direct relevance to most commodity farms in California.

The Conservation title features environmental programs, the most important of which for California are the working lands programs that support farms that undertake measures to mitigate to environmental concerns. Subsidies for land idling have been less relevant to California in the past. This time around we may have a climate title rather than just climate-related provisions in the Conservation title.

The Nutrition Title authorizes funding and makes modifications to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), as well as commodity distribution and some miscellaneous programs. Authorization and main reform issues for other major food programs such as School Lunch programs and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) are usually not part of the Farm Bill cycle, even though these large and substantial programs (and others) are administered by the Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA.

The Farm Bill is national in scope the important to all Californians. It is also complicated. Generally, the only people who really know what is in each title are those constituents most effected and that makes the process often opaque for the rest of us.