Why Care About the Farm Bill?
Understanding the Agriculture Reform, Food and Jobs Act of 2012
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When you think of the Food and Farm Bill, do you think of complicated subsidies and large farm productions? If so, you're partially right. The bill gives direction to America's food and farm policies but it also governs a broad range of programs that include conservation, forestry and food assistance -- almost 80% of funding.

Congress enacted the first Farm Bill in the 1930s to regulate food production. During World War I, the U.S. government encouraged American farmers to increase food production in order to help feed a war-torn Europe. However, as Europe became less dependent on food aid, this increase eventually led to a national surplus and falling prices for basic crops. In an effort to bring up prices, Congress passed legislation that paid farmers not to grow crops. This principle has remained in place for the last 80 years, with Congress revising this legislation every five or so years. Each rendition is coined as the new “Farm Bill” and has come to mean commodity subsidies, emergency food assistance and (often underfunded) titles supporting local food, farms and sustainability.

So, why care about the Farm Bill? The bill’s “titles” or funded programs, define the way we grow and eat our food. Crop subsidies for commodity crops mostly go to large firms producing wheat, soy, corn, cotton, and rice, and the result is low-priced processed foods. Curiously, fruits and vegetables are so under-supported in the bill’s titles that they are referred to as “specialty crops.”
The vast majority of the bill addresses food assistance benefits and crop subsidies, creating a stalemate between anti-hunger advocates and agribusiness. This conflict prevents controversial change to either pot of funding.

Forty percent of the nation’s land is under the jurisdiction of the Farm Bill, giving agriculture a big responsibility for environmental stewardship. Though much smaller pieces of the pie, the bill also funds and governs issues like renewable energy investments, forestry programs, farm-to-school lunch programs, support for organic farming, community food security, farmer’s markets and support for beginning or underserved farmers. Seattle Tilth has been fortunate in benefitting from both the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program for Seattle Tilth Farm Works and Community Food Project grants for Rainier Valley Eats. No doubt, we think this funding is valuable.

The 2012 Farm Bill is being debated at a time when each dollar spent by the federal government is under close scrutiny. The Senate and House Agriculture Committee each have proposed versions of the bill. Republicans and Democrats are waging a political battle especially over the funding needed for food assistance programs and subsidy distribution. With so many titles for a wide array of programs, reconciling the House and Senate bills for a final version is always contentious.

With a severe drought gripping much of the nation this year, farmers are concerned that the disaster relief funds made available through the Farm Bill will not be offered in time to mitigate the damages. The USDA is expecting to see food prices increase 3-4% throughout the rest of 2012 and into 2013 because of the drought. The Farm Bill could keep rising food prices in check. There are a number of things you can do to make a sustainable, healthy Farm Bill a reality. First, stay informed! The status of the legislation changes often and it is important to understand what is being proposed. There are a number of organizations following Farm Bill developments and advocating for change, such as the Northwest Farm Bill Action Group, The National Sustainable Agricultural Coalition and American Farmland Trust. Write, email or call your local representatives and tell them to get to work on a Farm Bill promoting organic and local agriculture, food access and healthy eating!