



I'm a Local

What Every American
Can Do to Address
Farm Bill Issues

BY MAX BECHER

"WHEN I WAS ASKED, WHAT DOES THE FARM BILL HAVE TO DO WITH MY LIFE AND MY COMMUNITY IN GENERAL, I THOUGHT OF MY EXPERIENCE ON THE LOCAL LEVEL."

My first introduction to the history of the Farm Bill was *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, by Paul Conklin, who traces the Farm Bill from its post-depression origins in the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act to the current day. Roughly half the book's chapters unfold the "complex story" of "the evolution of federal farm programs in that eighty year span [1929-2009], for such policies provided the context for a revolution in agricultural productivity." Conklin makes the point that not only was modern agriculture shaped by these federal policies, they also serve as a link between all Americans and agriculture. "It is also at the policy level that all American citizens are involved with agriculture, for it is their representatives in Congress who develop such policies."

I would add that all Americans eat, and eating is an agricultural act with social and moral implications. Every American is viscerally involved with agriculture by the fact that they have a daily need for food. Agriculture's prominent role in environmental stewardship provides another compelling reason to take interest in the policies that shape what Pope Francis terms "Our Common Home."

Farmer or non-farmer, we would all do well to consider the Farm Bill and what it means for our lives. As Catholics, we have been called explicitly by the Holy Father to take interest in the task

of protecting our Common Home (*Laudato Si'* 13,14), and agriculture is a key player in that effort.

THE PARADOX

The danger lurking in the concept of a federal Farm Bill is a paradoxical two-edged sword. Farming is a complex and intricate business. Extrapolating it to the federal level in a nation of our size risks first that nothing will get done. When things do eventually get done, there's a fair chance government's one-size-fits-all policies could end up negatively affecting the whole country. The 2014 Farm Bill took an extra 2 years to be signed into law, while farms were going out of business in the meantime. And I am not alone in stating that certain federal farm policies over the years have arguably led to the demise of many family farms, rather than renewing American rural communities.

During pre-election periods, I am often frustrated by the energy expended on national issues, and national policies attempting to solve problems which could be more effectively dealt with locally. Many take more interest in the soap-opera of presidential debates than in local ballot initiatives or actually rolling up their sleeves in their communities. As a society, we have become fixated on national solutions, and farming is no exception.

Wendell Berry contrasts gov-

ernment solutions to local ones in his essay *Think Little*. "While the government is 'studying' and funding and organizing its Big Thought, nothing is being done. But the citizen who is willing to Think Little, and, accepting the discipline of that, to go ahead on his own, is already solving the problem." Stephen Covey's best-seller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, unpacks the hidden power of the citizen mentioned by Berry. The citizen focuses on his Circle of Influence, which is smaller than his Circle of Concern. Put another way, we can be worried about many things, but we only have power to change some of them, usually ones happening closer to us.

Watching or reading the news gives access to issues of concern around the world, but most of us can't do much to change them. Covey argues that expending energy in one's circle of concern is reactive, and leads to depression and inactivity. Restricting one's energy to the narrower Circle of Influence however is proactive, and leads to empowerment. More importantly, by prioritizing one's circle of influence, that circle tends to grow larger, giving that person more and more influence over time.

The danger in discussing a national Farm Bill is that it can distract us from the circles where we exert the most influence. The key to maximizing the bill's effective-

ness is restricting it to areas it can effectively influence, once more localized efforts prove insufficient.

CATHOLIC TEACHING

As Catholics, we are blessed with a rich body of social teachings, which provide guiding principles of action to steer clear of such danger. Most relevant in this context is the principle of Subsidiarity. Simply put, Subsidiarity requires social needs to be met first by individuals and “lesser” organizations (family, local communities etc.) before being addressed by larger, more centralized organizations (especially, but not limited to governments). When larger entities act, they must do so in a way that assists and empowers the subordinate rings of society to help themselves and their communities. Large centralized organizations exist to help real people and their communities help themselves; when they unnecessarily supplant efforts beneath them, they overstep their bounds.

TWO REAL LIFE EXAMPLES

The examples provided here are two from my own life where I acted in my circle of influence on Farm Bill issues. One deals with policy, but on a local level rather than federal. The other is an example of charity in my community which solved a problem without relying on government.

Last year, a local ordinance in my home county of Ventura, California was expiring. Ventura has a strong agricultural economy, but is under constant pressure to convert its land to urban development. The bill preserves farmland

by requiring a referendum before rezoning farmland for development. For the last twenty years, the bill effectively protected Ventura farmland from unchecked development, while our next-door neighbors in Los Angeles County saw their agriculture largely disappear underneath concrete.

As a local farmer, I was approached by several in our community and asked to publicly endorse the bill’s renewal. I was reluctant to become involved, but recognized my unique position as a farmer to exert meaningful influence in my community. As a young farmer, I restricted my comments to an area of the bill I

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saw as a blind spot, and one uniquely relevant to me and my generation. I argued that while we were effectively keeping County farmland undeveloped, our farmers were aging every year, and the land being saved was too expensive for young aspiring farmers to buy. The bill was titled “Save our Agricultural Resources” (SOAR). SOAR was saving farmland, but ignoring the most precious agricultural resource: farmers. By taking action on a local level instead of a national one, my voice was actually heard by local policy makers, including our County Supervisor who I spoke with on the phone. By keeping my comments confined to a particular sub-issue relevant to me, I kept within my circle of influence. If I were to speak out in my community again on a similar issue, my circle of influence will likely be a little larger

than it was the first time. In the spirit of Subsidiarity, SOAR is a local bill addressing a uniquely localized need, and lends itself to commentary from those most affected by it. The bill was passed, and continues to protect our farmland from development pressure. Although my comments did not change the bill’s wording, it brought the topic of young farmers and local land access to the table for many people that had not considered it before.

My second example has to do with poverty and hunger. Approximately 80% of the expiring Farm Bill’s funding goes to the federal nutrition programs. Hunger has always been a social problem, and Christians are called to be active in ministering to them. If there is one social issue conducive to being addressed on a local

or community level, chronic hunger is a strong candidate. Volumes could be written about the role of government in eliminating hunger, but the one point I wish to make here is that the more government provides a safety net for the poor, the fewer opportunities communities and individuals have for charity. Even if a government program succeeds in getting nutritious food to the poor, our communities lose one of the strongest internal bonds apart from familial relationships: giving and receiving help on a personal level.

There are numerous ways communities already feed their own hungry, and Christians must not let federal programs eclipse their efforts in this realm. My wife and I operate a small vegetable farm, and I have often pondered how I could get our fresh, healthy, un-



processed food into the hands of those who are struggling financially while still making a living for my family. Most of our customers have the means to pay us a fair price for our food, but my heart longs to get our food into the hands of the poor.

We recently met a new customer, and learned she is a disabled woman living alone on \$900 a month. When we discovered her situation, we reduced our home delivery fee from \$5 per order to \$1. She was immensely grateful, and orders fresh produce almost every week. I doubt she experiences the same level of personal gratitude when she gets her disability check (as necessary as that may be), and we have the true joy of knowing we are helping a particular person in need.

This gave me the idea that we could start a program of our own with our local produce delivery service that could identify people of need in our community, and eliminate their delivery fee 100% for a period of time. We could also provide a certain percentage off the food price. We could split the discounted amount 50/50 with

some of our other customers who could volunteer to help sponsor one of the needier customers. This would share the burden between the recipient, our business, and one other charitable customer. The customer receiving assistance could write a letter describing their situation which could be shared with their “Sponsor,” and provide them with a letter of gratitude too. This would address on a micro-scale two “Farm Bill” issues at once: it would bring more business to local farms, and get fresh food into the hands of those who need it most, while providing accountability. Most importantly, it would forge meaningful connections and build up community.

TAKE AWAY

Both SOAR and our hunger program idea tackle some of the same problems addressed in the Farm Bill, but from a local perspective. As we discuss what programs are going to be funded in the new Farm Bill, an equally important question is: what programs could be better organized locally? As Christians, we need to

be asking ourselves: am I doing everything I can within my unique sphere of influence to make the Farm Bill unnecessary? Is there one more thing I could do to help those around me? Am I caring for the poor in my community? Am I patronizing American farms with my grocery purchases, or buying imported food? Could I be supporting a local farmer, and learning more about his unique needs? Could I shift a percentage of my entertainment budget toward buying local and sustainably raised food?

If each one of us actually took these questions seriously and acted on them, the Farm Bill’s existence might eventually no longer be necessary. Whether we ever reach that day or not, Farm Bill discussions among Catholics must remember the principle of Subsidiarity, and avoid the temptation of relying on federal programs where local initiatives could suffice. “Thinking Little” in an age of “Thinking Big” will slowly thread together the fabric that built up our country in the first place. Let’s roll up our sleeves and get to work!