ACPM Recommendations for Improving the Health Impacts of US Farm Policy

Key Issues

Farm policy has a significant direct and indirect effect on personal and public health. The United States Federal Farm Bill has a significant effect on which and how much of each crop is grown and which animals are raised.[1] The bill authorizes and funds the largest food supplementation program in the country, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), colloquially known as food stamps.[2] Diet has a significant impact on health,[3,4] and the healthiness of a diet is correlated with socioeconomic status.[5] Multiple studies have demonstrated strong associations between expanded benefits and health outcomes,[6-9] including reducing rates of delayed development and birth defects,[6] drops in hospital and emergency department use,[7] slowing of increases in hemoglobin A_1C[8] and decreased total cholesterol.[8] The Farm Bill also authorizes and funds the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides excess food grown by U.S. farmers to public or private nonprofit organizations that provide nutrition assistance to low-income Americans, either by distributing food for home use or preparing meals to be served in a congregate setting.[10]

U.S. farms contributed about 1% of U.S. GDP,[11] and agriculture was responsible for 10% of greenhouse gas emissions in 2021 (not accounting for electricity generated for agriculture).[12] A growing body of evidence is accumulating of the direct and indirect effects climate change is having on the health of the world's population.[13] These effects result from increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters, such as hurricanes, flooding and heat waves,[14] which acutely increase deaths from injury. These events, along with long-term increases in temperatures, put additional stresses on those with chronic diseases and/or those who work outside, expands the range of insects carrying the world's leading causes of infectious death such as malaria[15] and decreases stability of food sources.[16] All of these increase suffering and premature death. Agriculture is also responsible for a high degree of local pollution from erosion to runoff of feces, dirtying local waterways to runoff of excess nitrogen from fertilizer, leading to algal blooms.[17]

A sizable population works in agriculture, and it is one of the least protected groups of workers in the United States. About 2.6 million people worked on farms in 2021, or about 1.3% of all workers in the United States.[18] Such workers need to work outdoors in all types of weather, are often exempt from the full protection of minimum wage laws and lack many work-place protections;[19] all of these factors place their health at extra risk. Indeed, farmworkers are exposed to health and safety risks from toxic pesticides, extreme heat and otherwise dangerous work environments at much higher levels than other workers,[20,21] while performing the labor that underpins a U.S. food and agriculture

industry valued at $1.26 trillion in 2021.[22,23] In particular, meatpacking workers have among the nation's most dangerous jobs even before COVID-19, when death rates went up because they were unprotected, yet treated as essential workers.[24] However, federal agencies focused on agriculture and health are investing just $16.2 million a year in research and education on farmworker health, or roughly $6.75 per farmworker.[22] Roughly half of hired crop farmworkers lack legal immigration status, so they leaving them without a consistent source of health coverage or health care.[25,25a] Because hired agricultural workers are not paid if they do not work, they are forced to work even when they are sick, which likely puts the nations' primary source of food at unnecessary risk of contamination from infectious disease.

Policy Recommendations

Nutrition Programs

More than 2/3 of those receiving SNAP benefits are children, senior citizens or those with disability.[26] Adult SNAP participants save an average of $1,400 per year in health care costs compared to non-participants.[27] In 2019, more than 1 in 7 children lived in food-insecure homes threatening their current and future heath, development and ability to learn.[28] The expanded childhood tax credit during the COVID epidemic helped decrease the rate of childhood poverty by about 50% and decreased childhood food insecurity. However, this tax credit expired at the end of 2021, and in 2022 the rate of households with children suffering food insecurity surpassed 2019.[29,30] It is essential that SNAP benefits be expanded. Additionally, eating habits established during childhood may influence life-long dietary patterns,[31] and a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, low in salt and saturated fats reduces all-cause mortality.[32,33] Therefore, it is important that individual benefits be designed so that they are big enough to buy plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and that the SNAP program encourages such purchases.

To improve the health of our nation, especially the poorest children amongst us, the ACPM supports:

- Increases in overall SNAP and separately TEFAP funding.
- Expanding eligibility for SNAP and increases in individual allowances.
- Streamlining eligibility and enrollment procedures.[26]
- Allowing U.S. territories to transition from capped Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) block grants to full participation in SNAP, allowing Tribal governments to administer federal programs and allowing SNAP participants to also receive Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits.[26]
- Programs such as matching dollar for dollar programs to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Increased funding for programs that support fruit and vegetable farmers, even at the expense of grain farmers and meat producers.

Environmental Issues

To reduce the adverse health effects on the population in general and agricultural workers from agricultural pollution, the ACPM supports:

- Increasing funding for research and programs to identify and promote agroecology practices that reduces the use of pesticides, reduces the release of greenhouse gasses, reduces air pollution and protects clean water.[22,23]
    - Increasing funding for Sustainable Nutrition Science (SNS) projects which is research that focuses on the intersection of agricultural production, climate change, soil health and human health. SNS should be a priority for funding projects supported by the USDA. However between 2016 and 2020, SNS projects received just 25 cents of every $1,000 in government research spending.[22]
    - Increasing funding for Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) and Organic Transitions Program (ORG): As the USDA's primary competitive research programs dedicated to addressing critical challenges facing organic and transitioning-to-organic producers, OREI and ORG support projects that advance climate mitigation and adaptation goals. Projects have led to actionable findings related to crop rotation, cover crops and integrated livestock-crop systems. Yet currently, fewer than one-third of proposals are funded. [22]

- Continuing funding for programs that encourage farmers to invest in conservation and climate-smart agricultural practices. This should include support for organic agriculture, but not be limited to it. This would continue efforts of prior farm bills and the historic $20 billion investment of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). This latter represents a major step forward for the United States in addressing climate change, and it is essential that this funding be maintained in the food and farm bill.[34]
    - Increased annual authorizations and appropriations for the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP). REAP was established in the 2008 Farm Bill to provide grants and loan guarantees to farmers and rural businesses for energy efficiency improvements and purchase of renewable energy systems. The program also provides grants to service providers who work with farmers and rural small businesses for energy audits and renewable energy planning and development.

<u>Food Safety</u>

Foodborne illness is shockingly common in the United States. Although it usually causes discomfort, it can lead to lost work-days, serious illness and even death. To protect the general population, the ACPM supports:

- Including the USDA-specific provisions of the Protecting America's Meatpacking Workers Act (PAMWA), which would help safeguard worker and food safety through labor standards for local meat and poultry processing grants, mandatory country-of-origin labeling for beef and pork.
- Increased funding to hire additional meat inspectors.

- Authorizing and funding a General Accountability Office (GAO) study of line speeds and their effectiveness in protecting animal, food and worker safety.

Farm Worker Protections

To protect the health of agricultural workers and in-directly society at large, the ACPM advocates that the next food and farm bill should:

- Establish a Farmworker and Food Chain Worker Office within the U.S. Department of Agriculture.[24]
- Establish new standards for USDA food procurement contracts that ensure a living wage for workers and increase overall funding to USDA to cover such costs.[24]
- Direct OSHA to set and enforce standards that protect farmworkers from heat-related injuries. Safety protocols for these workers should be consistently implemented when the heat index reaches 80°F, to protect against 99 percent of injuries and 100 percent of deaths.[24]
- Guarantee farmworkers the right to sufficient rest, shade and water, the need for which will increase as extreme heat becomes more common. These rules should apply to all farms, including those with fewer than 11 employees.[24]
- Increase protections for meatpacking workers.[24]
- Direct the EPA to make rigorous and timely assessments of risk when considering whether to allow, ban or restrict the use of pesticides.
- Increase funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to enforce these improved pesticide and heat-related injury prevention rules.
- Increase investments in public agricultural and agroecological research programs, particularly those that reduce exposure to extreme heat, reduce heat-trapping emissions and reliance on pesticides.[24]
- Double the amount of funding for National Institute of Food and Agriculture to conduct work that directly engages farmworkers as partners in developing research and education priorities, with increased focus on climate-related risks and pesticide exposure and underrepresented populations with specific needs and vulnerabilities.[24]

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