

Runsten and Schwartz: Farm bill vital to California

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By Dave Runsten and Steve Schwartz

California consumers and farmers alike have a lot to lose if Congress fails to pass a farm bill. California is the largest agricultural state in the country, producing the majority of the country's fruits, vegetables and nuts. The farm bill includes programs that have real consequences for our food and agriculture here.

Many farm bill programs support California's agriculture, including providing resources for farmers transitioning to organic production or implementing conservation practices, as well as funding the development of farmers markets and community-supported agriculture programs or bringing fresh, healthy produce to our schools and hospitals. In addition, the farm bill assists the 4 million Californians who were receiving food stamps in 2012. The farm bill deeply impacts the health of our people and our economy.

For decades lawmakers have gotten together every five years to collaborate across party lines to craft a farm bill that specifies our national food and farm programs. However, the House leadership split off the nutrition programs from the rest of the bill in June, and last week passed a measure that included draconian cuts to food stamps that are unlikely to be approved by the Senate or White House. These moves create uncertainty regarding what will become of the programs important to California agriculture that are set to expire today.

Now Congress has the opportunity to fix the farm bill by tempering the cuts to nutrition programs while strengthening the innovative food and farm programs that will lead to a healthier food system.

Recent farm bills are infamous for providing subsidies that have often ended up in the hands of wealthy absentee landlords, including residents of Manhattan and a few celebrities. Government subsidies to commodity crops (grains, oilseeds, cotton) and crop insurance have made up some 70% of farm-bill funding to agriculture. Relatively little of this goes to California because vegetable, fruit and nut "specialty crops" plus dairy and meat products make up over 80% of the value of agricultural production in our state. California's congressional delegation must focus on farm bill programs serving farmers and ranchers in our state.

What farm bill programs make a direct impact on California's food and farming? Key examples include loan programs and conservation programs supporting agricultural practices that protect soils, water and air.

Seth Nitschke of Open Space Meats markets beef from Merced County to restaurants in Los Angeles, Yosemite National Park and beyond. The young rancher could not have expanded his operation without direct USDA loans. John Texeira, of Lone Willow Ranch in Firebaugh, like many other California farmers, used the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and Conservation Security Program to make his irrigation system more efficient and to reduce air pollution.

Other less well-known, yet important programs, represent a very small piece of the farm bill budget pie. They include programs that assist beginning farmers with training and education, advance organic farming research and certification cost-sharing, and direct marketing of local farm products. Locally, First 5 of Madera County accessed Farmers Market Promotion Program funds to expand the local farmers market, including supporting purchases of produce by low-income families.

Ten of these small but crucial programs were placed on the budget chopping block when Congress failed

to act on the farm bill last year and now they face an uncertain future as Congress negotiates over the coming weeks. These programs brought over \$20 million in competitive grants and loans to California since 2009, providing direct investment as well as technical assistance and training to support agricultural businesses. It would be a mistake for any farm bill to move forward without these 10 programs that have a real impact in our communities.

California lawmakers — including Reps. Jim Costa, Kevin McCarthy and Nancy Pelosi — are well-positioned to fight for the programs, reforms and funding that make a difference to California. We call on them to work in a bipartisan fashion to deliver the farm bill that California needs now.

Dave Runsten is policy director of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers. Steve Schwartz is coordinator for California Caucus of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.