

# The Case for Presidential Action to Reform the Farm and Food System

## HIGHLIGHTS

*US farm and food policies often encourage outcomes that work against one another. This lack of coordination has wide-ranging negative consequences for Americans, including economic stagnation in the nation's rural areas and mounting costs—for example, from drinking water contamination and diet-related diseases—that fall unfairly on taxpayers, small farms, and local governments. The Trump administration has an opportunity to overhaul federal agriculture and food policies so they work together, focused on the same goals. The president can lead a major new initiative designed to benefit rural and urban communities, save taxpayer dollars, and make the food system work better for all Americans.*

As the new Trump administration gets under way, one of the most critical issues affecting all Americans—and requiring immediate attention—is the state of our farm and food system. Our system is out of balance, with numerous federal policies working at cross-purposes. While some policies, for example, attempt to increase Americans' consumption of fruits and vegetables, others subsidize crops largely fed to livestock or destined for processed foods. Moreover, our out-of-balance system has created a slew of unintended consequences. Workers in the agriculture and food industries have less purchasing power; farmers' and ranchers' productivity and long-term resilience to pests, weather, and other challenges are diminished; the nation's drinking water is threatened by farm runoff; and the health care sector is reeling from the costs of diet-related diseases.

There is good news: another approach can, according to recent analyses by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), save taxpayers billions of dollars while increasing economic opportunity for farmers and food system workers, protecting soil and water, and improving public health. Our analysis points to the need for an alignment and streamlining of federal farm and food policies so they work together in our long-term interest.

The Trump administration has an opportunity to realign the American food system around a shared goal: ensuring every American has access to healthy, affordable, sustainably produced food whose production is fair to food system workers and profitable for farmers. To accomplish this, President Trump should



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*Research has shown that innovative farming systems can enhance yields and profits, and that areas with more midsize farms and a stronger middle class are more stable, with lower poverty and unemployment rates. Policy reforms that support this kind of farming can help farmers and revive rural communities.*

take immediate action on a handful of priorities that will benefit rural and urban communities and save taxpayer dollars, and coordinate federal agriculture and food policies and initiatives across all parts of the executive branch to make the food system work better for all Americans.

## **The Current Food System Isn't Working for Americans (and They Know It)**

An initiative to coordinate agriculture and food policies for the benefit of taxpayers, farmers, food workers, our economy, and the environment would have broad public support, as many Americans have begun to see that today's food system is not working. A 2015 national poll of likely voters (LRP and BRC 2015) revealed that:

- seventy-five percent were concerned that five of the eight worst-paying jobs in America are in the food system;
- eighty-one percent expressed concern that the federal government's dietary guidelines are not reflected in its farm subsidies; and
- seventy-five percent favored incentives that promote sustainable farming.

What these Americans have begun to understand is that behind our food choices is a set of government policies that is neither efficient nor well coordinated, and encompasses conflicting goals. These policies, carried out by at least 15 federal agencies, often work against one another and produce a variety of adverse outcomes, from low-paying jobs and economic stagnation in our nation's rural areas to farm pollution and poor childhood nutrition. Rather than continuing to approach these issues in isolation, President Trump can capitalize on the public's support to address them together, pursue a more coherent food policy system, and achieve dramatically better returns on taxpayer investments.

## **Boosting Farmers' Livelihoods and Revitalizing Rural Communities**

The last 30 years have seen worrying trends in the demographics of farming and the economics of farm communities. Farmers are getting older—in 2012, the average age was 58.3 years—and high land prices mean that farmland is concentrated in ever fewer hands. Midsize family farms, historically the backbone of rural economies in the United States, have been disappearing for almost two decades. UCS estimates that nearly 56,000 midsize farms were lost nationally between 2007 and 2012 (Mulik 2016a).

When these farms disappear, jobs and economic opportunity evaporate and rural communities decline. Research has shown that areas having more midsize farms and a stronger middle class have lower poverty and unemployment rates, higher average household incomes, and greater socioeconomic stability (Mulik 2016a). Meanwhile, the trend toward growing just one or two crops on tens of millions of acres of farmland has spurred enormous fertilizer use and created problems such as herbicide-resistant weeds—predicaments that impose staggering costs on farmers. US farmers spent a record \$15.8 billion on agricultural chemicals in 2014, nearly twice as much as in 2002 (USDA 2016).

***Connecting new and existing farmers with large food buyers such as restaurants, supermarkets, hospitals, and schools can help bring back midsize farms and create tens of thousands of jobs.***

**Reforming and coordinating our nation's farm policies would help struggling farmers and revive rural communities.** This stronger system would help more young and beginning farmers access land and credit, would connect farmers with local markets, and would increase public investment in research, technical assistance, and incentives for farmers to adopt diversified, low-input agricultural systems. Recent research has demonstrated the value of such policies:

- UCS analysis in Iowa shows that connecting new and existing farmers with large food buyers such as supermarkets, restaurants, hospitals, and school districts can help bring back midsize farms and create tens of thousands of jobs (Mulik 2016a).
- A long-term experiment at Iowa State University demonstrated that rotational cropping systems served to enhance yields and profits while reducing pesticide use and pollution. Average corn yields were 4 percent higher and average soybean yields 9 percent higher compared with a conventional system, and the longer rotations were just as profitable as corn/soy alone (Davis et al. 2012).

## Helping Workers, Saving Taxpayer Money, and Contributing to National Security

The farm and food system has negative impacts on workers, taxpayers, and our long-term security. Despite the billions spent on farm and food programs, too many working people aren't paid enough to afford the food they need to be healthy, leading to higher health care costs and putting our national security at risk. For example:

- Nearly 20 million workers—one-sixth of the workforce— toil in farm fields, slaughterhouses, processing plants, food warehouses, grocery stores, and restaurants. These jobs are among the nation's lowest-paying, and a recent survey of more than 600 such workers found that only 13.5 percent earned a livable wage (Food Chain Workers Alliance 2012).
- US taxpayers spend \$152.8 billion per year on public assistance for low-wage working families through Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program, Temporary Aid to Needy Families, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) (Jacobs, Perry, and MacGillvary 2015). The families of fast food workers, in particular, are enrolled in one or more public entitlement programs at twice the rate of the workforce as a whole (52 percent versus 25 percent) (Allegretto et al. 2013).



US Department of Agriculture

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- Today's government farm programs spend billions of public dollars in ways that create additional costs down the road. For example, in 2012, taxpayers picked up a \$172 billion tab for Medicare and Medicaid payments to treat diet-related cardiovascular disease (O'Hara 2013).
- Approximately one in four young adults is ineligible for military service because of excess body fat, and the US Department of Defense spends an estimated \$1 billion per year for medical care associated with weight-related health problems (Christeson et al. 2012).

**Reforming and coordinating our nation's farm policies would help workers and invest taxpayer dollars in ways that don't create additional costs.**

## Enhancing Farmers' Long-Term Productivity and Resilience

Today's industrialized farms require massive chemical and energy inputs and generate widespread pollution. Fertilizer runoff and erosion generate enormous water pollution problems: for example, drinking water supplies in cities including Des Moines, Iowa, and Toledo, Ohio, are contaminated by farm runoff, and the national price tag for agricultural nitrogen pollution is estimated at \$157 billion a year (Mulik 2016b).

Today's agriculture also contributes increasingly to global warming, accounting for about 9 percent of total US heat-trapping emissions in 2014 (EPA 2016). In turn, farmers are highly vulnerable to the effects of global warming, including the floods, droughts, and infestations that experts expect will become more frequent and more damaging. Yet at the same time, public research to develop and refine integrated, effective solutions to these problems is woefully underfunded (UCS 2015).

**Reforming and coordinating our nation's farm policies would help farmers adopt sustainable systems with a variety of benefits.** Redesigned farm policies would invest in the research, technical assistance, and incentives that farmers need to adopt sustainable farming systems based on the principles of agroecology.

- Just one such system—planting perennial prairie plants strategically in strips on 10 percent of farmland—can reduce nitrogen runoff into rivers and streams by 85 percent, phosphorus runoff by 90 percent, and sedimentation in water bodies by 95 percent (Helmets et al. 2012).
- UCS analysis demonstrates that policies encouraging adoption of the prairie strip system across the Corn Belt could reap more than \$850 million in savings for farmers and society at large through reduced nitrogen runoff and sedimentation of surface waters (Mulik 2016b).

**Fertilizer runoff contaminates drinking water in Iowa, Ohio, and elsewhere. Nationally, nitrogen pollution from farms costs an estimated \$157 billion a year.**

- Practices such as planting perennials can also sequester carbon, reduce the release of heat-trapping emissions from farms, and build healthy soils that hold more water and improve farmers’ resilience to both droughts and floods (Asbjornsen et al. 2013). The benefits of expanding such practices would be substantial, with the gains in soil carbon alone potentially offsetting as much as 27 to 58 percent of agriculture’s current emissions (Chambers, Lal, and Paustian 2016; EPA 2016).

**Building a Healthier Future for All Children**

Children born in the 2000s have a shorter life expectancy than their parents, thanks to spiking rates of obesity and diet-related diseases that occur at ever-younger ages (Olshansky et al. 2005). And families and children of color are disproportionately affected, as obesity rates have leveled off for white children but continue to climb for African American and Hispanic children. A recent UCS analysis revealed that across all counties in the United States, living near fast food outlets and convenience stores is associated with higher diabetes rates—especially in counties with relatively large populations of color (Haynes-Maslow 2016).

Diet-related diseases also add many billions of dollars each year to our national health care bill: treating heart disease and stroke, for example, cost an estimated \$94 billion in 2010, and this figure is projected to nearly triple by 2030 (O’Hara 2013).

Yet current federal policies still largely encourage the sale and consumption of junk foods, while doing too little to help families choose and access healthy foods. Consider the fact that elements of today’s *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and other federal policies contradict scientific findings on the negative health consequences of consuming added sugars—putting a generation of kids at risk (Reed, Johnson, and Phartiyal 2016). And while the *Dietary Guidelines* recommend that fruits and vegetables make up half our diet, between 1995

and 2014 the federal crop insurance program (the primary source of government farm subsidies) allocated only a little more than 6 percent of its funds to these healthy foods (EWG 2016). And policies fail to sufficiently connect farmers of healthy foods with markets and to ensure affordable access for all consumers.

**Reforming and coordinating our nation’s farm policies would reinforce, not subvert, federal dietary recommendations.** It would end preferences for corn and other commodity crops, and level the playing field for farmers who want to grow the healthy foods—including fruits and vegetables—recommended by the federal government’s *Dietary Guidelines*. A portion of the savings from these reforms should be invested in innovative programs that are proven to increase access to healthy foods in schools, day care facilities, and neighborhoods in every zip code. UCS analysis has shown the wide-ranging benefits such policies can have:

- Schoolchildren who receive free or reduced-price meals eat more fruits and vegetables than their peers (Haynes-Maslow and O’Hara 2015).
- Increased neighborhood access to healthy foods is associated with lower rates of diabetes, especially in communities of color (Haynes-Maslow 2016).



Current federal policies largely encourage the sale and consumption of junk foods, while doing too little to help families choose and access healthy foods. By reforming policies to reinforce federal dietary recommendations rather than subvert them, the Trump administration can help ensure a healthier future for all Americans.

- With public policies aligned to help all Americans eat the recommended levels of fruits and vegetables, our country could save 127,000 lives each year and save \$17 billion in annual health care costs for cardiovascular disease alone (O'Hara 2013).

## What the Trump Administration Should Do

Our farm and food system must work for *all* Americans. For decades, taxpayers have paid for federal farm and food policies that have produced an abundance of commodity crops, but also a host of problems ranging from decimated rural communities and lost farms to expensive diet-related chronic diseases. We need a food system that responsibly invests taxpayer money to support farmers, farmworkers, and rural communities, while producing healthy food and safeguarding our natural resources.

This change must be led by the president. Only he can move us away from the politics of the status quo and embedded special interests that prevent Congress from making the kind of transformative changes that our nation's farm and food policies deeply need. President Trump can begin to fix the food system by taking the following steps.

1. In the administration's first year, take action on these priorities, which will benefit both rural and urban Americans and save taxpayer dollars:
  - Reform agricultural policies, subsidies, and supports to ensure fair markets and pricing for diverse farms of all sizes.
  - Increase children's access to healthy food and curtail junk food marketing to kids.
  - Support sustainable, diversified, and organic farming in all communities.
  - End Fair Labor Standards Act exemptions for farmworkers.



*The president must lead our nation's efforts to reform food and farm policies. By moving away from the politics of the status quo and embedded special interests, he can enable and empower Congress to make the kind of transformative changes we deeply need.*

- Ban the practice of feeding antibiotics to animals that are not sick.
2. Coordinate efforts across federal agencies in order to reduce inefficiency, increase productivity, and develop policies that ensure every American has equal access to healthy, affordable food whose production is fair to workers, good for the environment, and keeps farmers on their land.

The administration's leadership on this front will steadily strengthen the health and well-being of Americans across the economic spectrum, improve farmers' and workers' livelihoods and rural economies' vitality, and enhance the nation's prosperity overall.

***We need a food system that responsibly invests taxpayer money to support farmers, farmworkers, and rural communities, while producing healthy food and safeguarding our natural resources.***

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