

ISSUE BRIEF

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Congress Should Separate Food Stamps from Agricultural Programs

Daren Bakst

About every five years, Congress passes a farm bill. Despite its name, the farm bill covers more than just agricultural programs. In reality, food stamps account for about 80 percent of the projected cost of the 2014 farm bill.¹

Agricultural programs and food stamps should not be combined into one bill. Instead, they should be considered on their own merits in separate pieces of legislation. This would help to make reform of these programs possible.

In 2014, Congress almost separated the farm bill into distinct bills for food stamps and agriculture programs. They should finish the job this year.

Combined for Political Reasons

These distinct programs are combined for political reasons, and supporters of this status quo openly acknowledge this. For example, in 2013, Senator Thad Cochran (R-MS), then Ranking Member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, told the North American Agricultural Journalists group that food stamps should continue to be included in the farm bill “purely from a political perspective. It helps get the farm bill passed.”²

This is classic logrolling, enabling legislators to secure support for their programs, which otherwise might not pass. Legislators who want to pass

agricultural programs might vote for the farm bill despite serious concerns with food stamp legislation and vice versa. The very admission that these programs need to be combined together to pass them makes a strong case for legislators to reevaluate each program on its own merits.

Helping to Make Reform Possible

The combined farm bill helps legislators to avoid accountability for supporting agricultural programs or food stamp legislation. For example, a legislator who otherwise would oppose food stamp legislation can point to agricultural programs as the reason for voting for the farm bill. If the legislator’s constituents strongly oppose food stamp legislation, the unrelated agricultural programs give the legislator cover for the farm bill vote.

There is an alliance of “food stamp legislators” and “farm subsidy legislators.” They have a strong incentive not to criticize the other legislators’ programs because the criticism may come back to hurt their own favored programs. They also want to avoid examining the issues in depth and instead push a combined farm bill through the process.

This lack of accountability and motivation for reform helps to maintain the status quo. Unless the programs are considered separately, reform will be difficult. Legislators should be expected to address these different programs independently so that they can be properly analyzed and debated.

Wide Support of Separation

In the 113th Congress, the House almost succeeded in separating the programs. It passed two separate bills, an agriculture-only farm bill³ and

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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another bill for just food stamps.⁴ The agriculture-only farm bill authorized programs for five years, while the food stamp bill authorized food stamps for three years. This would have put these programs on different timelines helping to ensure that in the short term their reauthorizations would be considered separately. The House combined both bills back together when the legislation went to conference, but the different timelines remained intact.⁵ However, legislators removed these different timelines during conference.

The public also supports separation. In the October 2013 Food Demand Survey⁶ conducted at Oklahoma State University,⁷ members of the public were asked whether they supported or opposed the following statement: “Separate the food stamp program from the farm bill and debate its merit separately from farm supports and subsidies.” An incredible 73 percent supported this statement.

Media outlets across the ideological spectrum from *The Wall Street Journal*⁸ to *The Washington Post* have supported separation. The editorial board of *The Washington Post* praised separation:

The House has finally passed a farm bill, and we'll start our discussion by listing the legislation's good points....

...[F]or the first time in many years, representatives passed agriculture-support programs separately from food stamps, ending the old log-rolling arrangement between urban and rural delegations that insulated both programs from scrutiny on the merits.⁹

What Congress Should Do

Congress should:

- **Address separation this year.** This does not require a farm bill. The House Agriculture Committee is already conducting a thorough review of the food stamp program, and Chairman Mike Conaway (R-TX) has said the committee will be looking at separation.¹⁰ The committee should pass a simple fix to existing law by making a procedural change that changes authorization timelines for the programs—similar to what the House did with its farm bill. Food stamps should be authorized through fiscal year (FY) 2016, while the agricultural programs would remain authorized through FY 2018. This would help to ensure that the programs would not overlap in the near future and would not be reauthorized together in a single piece of legislation.

1. Ralph M. Chite, “The 2014 Farm Bill (P.L. 113-79): Summary and Side-by-Side,” Congressional Research Service CRS Report, February 12, 2014, http://www.farmland.org/programs/federal/documents/2014_0213_CRS_FarmBillSummary.pdf (accessed April 2, 2015).
2. “O’Connor, Thatcher: Next Farm Bill May Be More Difficult,” *The Hagstrom Report*, April 23, 2014, http://www.hagstromreport.com/2014news_files/2014_0423_oconner-thatcher-next-farm-bill-more-difficult.html (accessed April 2, 2015).
3. Federal Agriculture Reform and Risk Management Act of 2013, H.R. 2642, 113th Cong., 1st Sess., <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-113hr2642eh/pdf/BILLS-113hr2642eh.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2015).
4. Nutrition Reform and Work Opportunity Act of 2013, H.R. 3102, 113th Cong., 1st Sess., <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/3102/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22H.R.+3102%22%5D%7D> (accessed April 2, 2015).
5. For example, see House Amendment to Senate Amendment to Federal Agriculture Reform and Risk Management Act of 2013, H.R. 2642, 113th Cong., 2nd Sess., §4024, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-113hr2642eah/pdf/BILLS-113hr2642eah.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2015). This is one provision that addresses the three-year authorization.
6. Jayson Lusk and Susan Murray, “Food Demand Survey,” Oklahoma State University, October 17, 2013, <http://agecon.okstate.edu/faculty/publications/4602.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2015).
7. Jayson Lusk, “Public Opinion About the Food Stamp Program,” *farmdoc daily*, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, October 18, 2013, <http://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2013/10/public-opinion-about-food-stamp-program.html> (accessed April 2, 2015).
8. Editorial, “The Farm Bill Revolt,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323393804578557863643555732> (accessed April 2, 2015).
9. Editorial, “The House’s Farm Bill Is a Perfect Disgrace,” *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-houses-farm-bill-is-a-perfect-disgrace/2013/07/12/ee3432ce-eb07-11e2-8f22-de4bd2a2bd39_story.html (accessed April 2, 2015).
10. Philip Brasher, “Lawmakers to Consider Splitting Next Farm Bill, Conway Says,” *Agri-Pulse*, February 23, 2015, <http://www.agri-pulse.com/Lawmakers-to-consider-splitting-farm-bill-02032015.asp> (accessed April 2, 2015).

■ **Move the food stamp program to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).**

The best way to ensure separation for the long term is to move food stamps from the Department of Agriculture to HHS. Food stamps should be moved to HHS regardless of separation. The food stamp program is a large, means-tested welfare program, similar to the numerous other welfare programs run by HHS. This would place food stamps in the department best suited to administer it.

Conclusion

Separation is not about a specific substantive change. It merely provides legislators with a means, regardless of their ideologies or positions on agricultural programs and food stamps, to carefully evaluate and possibly make changes to these programs. The current farm bill process prevents this from happening.

Members of Congress need to thoughtfully discuss significant issues regarding agricultural programs and food stamps. If these issues are considered separately, thoughtful discourse and potential reforms could become a reality. All Americans from farmers to taxpayers to food stamp recipients deserve nothing less.

—*Daren Bakst is Research Fellow in Agricultural Policy in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies, of the Institute for Economic Freedom and Opportunity, at The Heritage Foundation.*