How Agricultural Policies Can Support New American Farmers

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Three mornings a week, Paul and Joanne travel from their small farm in central Indiana to farmers' markets in cities and college towns across the region. They arrive early to arrange attractive, rustic-looking baskets of kale and beets alongside meats with bold labels advertising that they are from local, anti-biotic free, pasture-raised animals. Although they advertise their products as all-natural, they do not certify them as organic – it is simply too expensive, Paul explains. Paul and Joanne bought their farm while still in high school, disillusioned with the confined-feeding of animals on large, corporate-owned farms.

As young, university-educated farmers new to agricultural work, Paul and Joanne have joined a growing trend of new American farmers building a market with urban consumers who are willing to pay more for food grown under the auspices of a different set of social, environmental, and economic values. As the median age for American farmers climbs to nearly 60, it is imperative to identify and support this next generation of food growers.

In December 2018, Congress approved an $867 billion farm bill. This bill determines funding priorities for food and agriculture policies over the next ten years, with many local, state, and federal consequences. Since the 1970s, food and agriculture policies in the United States have aimed to help farms grow larger and allow farmers to produce greater yields of key crop and animal commodities. To accomplish this, Congress has pushed credit, subsidies, labor policies, infrastructure, and supply chains that support farm consolidation and create incentives for farmers to produce cheaper grains, dairy, and animal products. Although these policies have helped reduce costs for consumers, they have led to a precipitous decline in the number of farmers. They have also increased farmer debts and reduced biologically diverse forms of agriculture. To support a new generation of farmers like Paul and Joanne who are capitalizing on consumer interest in local, small, biodiverse, artisanal, and even urban agriculture, farm bill policies must focus more efforts on building small-scale agricultural supply chains.

The Importance of America's Small Farmers

A recent analysis of the agricultural census from the last 20 years reveals that new American farmers tend to thrive in a specific geographic areas. Younger, smaller, less experienced families who are new to agriculture tend to set up operations in areas just outside suburban cores, between rural farmland that is dominated by large-scale agricultural corporations and the expensive real estate that would price out small farms. In these corridors between urban and rural spaces, small farmers can still reach urban markets and enjoy urban amenities, without dealing with high real estate prices, hefty gas expenditures, or competition for farmland that drives prices beyond what they can afford.

Research shows that these new American farmers are motivated in part by concerns about biodiversity, soil health, chemical use, and sustainable rural livelihoods. They therefore help support rare livestock and plant breeds, provide attractive rural employment, raise land values, and meet a growing consumer demand for local food. However, these new farmers can only flourish with the help of policies that further viable supply chains, provide agricultural support and troubleshooting, and reduce economic risks for their endeavors.

Improved Supports for America's Farms

Since 2008, farm bill appropriations have made great strides in supporting small farmers and building local supply chains. However, current farm bill polices continue to use taxpayer dollars to push farmers to overproduce commodities like milk and corn. This keeps consumer prices low, but stronger regulations to cover farmers' risks could stabilize prices without producing excesses that are subsidized by taxpayers. Revised regulations could open room for small farmers who can produce a greater variety of plant and animal products. What is more, farm bill priorities could be shifted to support new American farmers in the communities where they thrive. They could:

- Build farm to school pipelines for local farmers by increasing funding for such programs and prioritizing local farm products.
- Create additional incentives for local farmers' markets by increasing and subsidizing their allotments for purchases by beneficiaries of Department of Agriculture food programs for low-income Americans and new mothers.
- Increase funding for extension programs and others that connect new farmers and ranchers to knowledge and technology resources geared to their needs.
- Decrease livestock subsidies for large-scale confined animal feeding operations in favor of more support for smaller producers.
- Redirect subsidy funding away from commodity and crop insurance programs that give funds to farmers' relatives and thus encourage farm consolidation. Instead, support smaller producers directly involved in agricultural work.
- Subsidize costs for small organic producers to help them reach larger markets.

Because research shows that these new farmers are setting up operations in corridors between urban and rural areas, these programs could be efficiently targeted at counties that sit between cities and large-scale farmland. This is especially true in areas where new farmers are quickly proliferating, as they are in the Great Lakes Region, East Texas and Oklahoma, the West Coast, and Central Florida. Local policymakers can help encourage new farmers in these areas by setting aside land for agricultural space, limiting suburban development, and subsidizing small portions of agricultural land in areas where suburban growth may be lucrative over the short term. Over the long term, local policymakers and real estate developers will find that preserving some farmland will increase overall property values by sustaining farmer's markets and greenspaces in suburban and urban communities.

Supporting the growing and changing ranks of new American farmers will be an important step in strengthening rural communities and meeting urban and suburban consumer demands. In general, farmers across the country are getting older. Farm consolidation since the 1970s has led to commodity overproduction, taxpayer waste, decreased rural labor opportunities, mounting farmer debt, and a reduction in agricultural biodiversity. State and federal policymakers can build a sustainable base for the next generation of agricultural work by directing farm bill funding toward new, innovative, younger farmers. They can and should shift resources from old-line farm supports to help smaller farmers in urban–rural corridors where local supply chains can be bolstered through farm-to-school programs, rezoning, and the encouragement of local farmers’ markets.

Read more in Andrew Flachs and Matthew Abel, “An Emerging Geography of the Agrarian Question: Spatial Analysis as a Tool for Identifying the New American Agrarianism,” *Rural Sociology*, (2018).