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## Farm aid blamed for obesity

### Congress urged to boost subsidies for fruit, nut, vegetable crops rather than meat and dairy.

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WASHINGTON – If you're feeling fat these days, blame Congress.

That's just what the nation's doctors are doing, saying that federal lawmakers are responsible for the fact that a salad costs so much more than a Big Mac.

Hoping to produce thinner waistlines, many doctors – including the American Medical Association – want Congress to stop subsidizing the production of foods that are high in fat and cholesterol and spend more to promote fruits, vegetables, legumes and grains that are not.

Farm Belt lawmakers are on the defensive.

"I agree that obesity and health are serious issues in America today," said Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., a member of the Senate Agriculture Committee. "However, blaming the cause on the crops that we grow in Kansas and/or the U.S. farm program is overlooking the personal responsibility we all have in our daily lives and diets."

The debate is intensifying as the Senate prepares to vote on a new farm bill. On Thursday, the Senate Agriculture Committee approved a bill that would give a record \$2 billion for specialty crops, which include fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits and nursery crops. That's at least four times as much as Congress provided in 2002, when it approved the last farm bill, and is a big boost for California growers.

The 2007 farm bill will determine which food industries get the most help from American taxpayers over the next five years.

"The real scandal in Washington is the farm bill," said Neal Barnard, president of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. "Senators take millions from corporations that produce bacon, burgers and other fatty foods. Then Congress buys up these unhealthy products and dumps them on our school lunch program. Companies get rich, and kids get fat."

Fruit and vegetable growers, who have long felt ignored on Capitol Hill, are confident they'll cash in this year. They want to persuade Congress to broaden subsidies beyond traditional farm crops such as corn, wheat, rice and cotton.

"Our markets are highly volatile, yet we have never relied on traditional farm programs to sustain our industry," said Doug Kraemer, co-owner of Blue Horizon Farms in St. Paul, Ore., which grows blueberries, grass seed, hazelnuts, clover, wheat, flower seeds and flowers.

Testifying at a recent congressional field hearing, Kraemer said he supports a future farm policy that not only will support agriculture but also "will support and encourage the health and well-being of all Americans." He noted that on any given day 45 percent of children eat no fruit at all, while 20 percent eat less than one serving of vegetables.

All U.S. children would benefit if Congress offered subsidies to lower the prices that consumers pay for fruits and vegetables, Krahmer said.

With the nation's obesity rates rising dramatically in recent years, doctors are jumping into the debate with increased fervor.

According to the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, agribusiness political action committees have given more than \$5 million over the past four election cycles to members of the Senate Agriculture Committee. And from 1995 to 2004, nearly three-quarters of farm bill agricultural subsidies for food – or more than \$51 billion – went to producers of meat, dairy, and feed crops used for cattle and other farm animals.

Less than half of 1 percent subsidized fruit and vegetable production, according to the physicians.

The group said that in 2005 alone, Tyson Foods, the nation's largest meat producer, received \$46.6 million in USDA commodity contracts.

Physicians are alarmed, saying the high-fat, high-cholesterol foods subsidized by the farm bill then found their way into the national school lunch program, contributing to obesity.

Members of Congress have been hearing a similar message from many different quarters this year.

In September, Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League, noted that since 1985, the actual price of fruits and vegetables has increased 40 percent, while the price of sugar and fats has declined by 14 percent. He said "underserved communities cannot be denied access to the same healthy and affordable food that is available to more affluent Americans."

Childhood obesity and the adult diseases associated with it have reached "epidemic proportions," Barnard said, noting government projections that children born in 2000 now have a one-in-three lifetime risk of developing diabetes. U.S. farm subsidies ensure that high-fat foods, such as corn syrup and corn oil, are cheap and widely available, while fruits, vegetables and healthier grains are not, he said.

All of the lobbying appears to be paying off.

"We decided that specialty crops needed to be a priority," Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns told the United Fresh Produce Association last month, before he resigned. He told the group that the recently passed House farm bill includes \$365 million in aid to expand block grants to states for specialty crops.

Overall, the House's farm bill, approved in late July, would offer an estimated \$1.7 billion for specialty crop programs.

House Democrats say their farm bill would spend \$400 million more for a fresh fruit and vegetable program for the school-lunch program. It would expand a program that gives vouchers to low-income elderly people who are eligible for food stamps to buy fresh produce at roadside stands. And it would create a demonstration project to evaluate ways to address obesity among low-income groups.

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