

Reality-checking the Farm Bill in CA

Jun 28, 2012 by Margaret Reeves



In the next couple weeks the House Agriculture Committee will negotiate its version of the 2012 Food and Farm Bill, following [last week's passage](#) of the Senate's decent version of the bill. In preparation, we took one of the House Ag Committee decision-makers (Fresno's Rep. Jim Costa) on a tour to make real what's at stake in this bill.

On June 15, PAN and other California members of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition helped organize a farm tour for Representative [Jim Costa](#). PAN's Raffaella Cerruti was there, along with farmer Will Scott, president of African American Farmers of California, Udi Lazimy of the Organic Farming Research Foundation ([OFRE](#)) and Caucus consultant Steve Schwartz.

Fresno Farmers lay out their priorities

Representative Costa witnessed Fresno-area farmers producing a variety of organically-grown crops, selling them in local markets and providing jobs for many local residents. He heard directly from these farmers about what support they most urgently need in order to continue to thrive economically, providing healthy food and jobs to their communities. Here are some of the key issues addressed:

- **Organics provide jobs.** The first visit was to [TD Willey's](#) farm. Tom grows certified organic vegetables that are mainly sold directly to consumers (through one of the biggest community-supported-agriculture, or CSA, programs in California). The farm provides diverse farmscape, with an incredible variety of vegetables, hedgerows and native flowers. Even more impressive is the number of people employed on the farm. By farming and harvesting year-round, Willey employs 60 permanent, full-time workers on 75 acres (with an additional 40 seasonal workers). Tom proudly reported that most of his employees have been working there for over 10 years.

"We were fascinated by the non-chemical soil solarization system Tom used to control pathogens and weeds."

— PAN research associate and tour participant Raffaella Cerruti

- **Make the Farm Bill work for organic producers.** At the second stop, [Purity Organics'](#) almond operation, Steve Koretoff illustrated how they have shifted production practices over time to address environmental issues while improving profitability. Although they are

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profitable, Steve believes the organic program cap limits within the Farm Bill's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) are too low. Steve also pointed out the need to change unfair crop insurance practices by developing organic price elections for organic crops and no-cost policy reforms that improve the EQIP Organic Initiative.

- **Help farmers, young and old, provide food to low-income communities.** Farmer Will Scott, president of the [African American Farmers of California](#), joined the tour and shared his perspective on ecological farming of southern specialty crops such as black-eyed peas. Will highlighted the importance of supporting local markets and beginning farmers, saying: “I work hard in order to conserve the soil and preserve the water. Being a sustainable farmer was not the real challenge for our farm, but finding places to sell our produce turned out to be more difficult.” He helped found the Mandela Farmers' Market in West Oakland, a predominately low-income neighborhood with no access to fresh, affordable and culturally appropriate food.

What we can do to make these real

Early next month, when Food and Farm Bill negotiations begin in the House, we expect to face a much tougher road as conservative members call for even bigger budget cuts. In fact, first up will be the [budget discussions](#) followed by program details and amendment negotiations.

As with the recent Senate round, we'll be urging support of several initiatives including:

- Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act
- Local Farms, Food and Jobs Act
- protection of conservation programs
- support for organic production, marketing and research

So stay tuned and roll up your sleeves to help with the upcoming round of negotiations — emailing, calling, and meeting with your representatives.

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