

Let's Call the Farm Bill What it is: Corporate Welfare

Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, doesn't want the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 — the "Farm Bill" — used as a political bargaining chip. "Our nation's farmers and ranchers are not pawns in a political game," he writes. "They are the lifeblood of our nation."

Duvall's claims might be more convincing if he didn't make them right after touting the political power of the agriculture lobby in unseating members of Congress deemed insufficiently loyal to it, powering "rural America's" election of Donald Trump to the presidency, etc. ... and threatening to use that political power as needed to preserve the tens of billions of dollars in corporate welfare represented by the Farm Bill.

Yes, corporate welfare.

As of 1870, one of every two Americans worked in agriculture. As of 2012, that number was less than one in 50 and sinking fast toward one in 100. Advances in science and technology allow one fiftieth as many people to feed ten times as many mouths (not counting exports) now as then.

Those advances have come hand in hand with corporate consolidation of the same sort seen in other industries. The day of the Depression-era family farm that my mother grew up on as one of 12 children, operating on human and animal power until they got their first truck right after World War Two and electricity shortly after that, is long gone. The kind of subsistence farm I lived on as a child, and the single-family operations my dad served as a dairy worker until his retirement in the 1990s, are fading away as well. Today, nearly all of the food you eat is produced either by, or under contract to, a few large companies.

The rawboned, overall-clad man driving a tractor 12 hours a day, calling the cows in for their evening milking, slopping the hogs, and sitting down for an evening pipe on the front porch before bed was once my grandfather. Now he's a carefully cultivated image of the past, used by organizations like Duvall's to propagandize for the transfer of billions dollars every year from your pockets to theirs via the political process, on top of what you spend in honest exchange for their livestock and crops.

The Farm Bill isn't going to save a way of life that for practical purposes no longer exists, nor is it going to bring back that way of life. In fact, a century of agricultural subsidies and welfare programs are at least partially responsible for killing off the family farm as we once knew it. Those subsidies and programs attracted people who were more interested in the subsidies and programs than in the farming. In this case, literally, the one percent.

Don't reform the Farm Bill. Kill it.