



## Praise for failed farm bill

By BRETT MALONE and STEVE SCHWARTZ  
Guest commentary

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As concerned taxpayers, can we rest easy knowing that Congress passed a Farm Bill of historic proportions? It is historic both in terms of its cost — close to \$300 billion — as well as the scope of problems it attempts to address. Or should we rest easy because President Bush vetoed the bill due to its lack of subsidy reform?

In fact, the legislation combines a crucial new vision and numerous lost opportunities.

This Farm Bill is historic due to unprecedented public participation, including by beginning farmers in Monterey County. More citizens than ever weighed in on what they value: more food assistance for low-income families, limiting agricultural subsidies, support for beginning farmers, expanded conservation programs, resources for fruit and vegetable crops research, marketing and trade assistance.

The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) and California FarmLink have been working for the past four years to learn what beginning farmers need from this legislation. We have helped them to understand the Farm Bill, how it can serve them, and how they might influence it.

There is reason to praise lawmakers for significant portions of the bill. The average age of California farmers is 56.8 years, and the situation of aging farmers is chronic nationwide. One breakthrough is the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, including \$75 million over four years for

education and assistance to generate new farming opportunities.

Additional support comes in the form of higher loan limits for low-interest USDA farm loans — the first increase for farm purchase loans in more than 20 years.

Rep. Sam Farr and Sen. Barbara Boxer were co-sponsors of beginning farmer legislation that ultimately became part of the final bill. The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Account (IDA) Pilot Program was included to assist beginners with start-up capital through a matched-savings program. But it has no funding. While the program will require an annual appropriation, it represents a victory for beginning farmers. Two Monterey County families with whom we work were able to purchase farms due to California FarmLink's one-of-a-kind IDA program, which served as the basis for the new federal program.

Those families, represented by Mar a Luz Reyes and Miguel Martinez, were determined to see additional farmers benefit from IDAs. They both contacted congressional offices to voice their support. Their belief in the program comes from direct experience: They are farmworker families who were able to purchase their own farms.

Those of us helping to establish the next generation of farmers have much to be excited about.

We find hope in this Farm Bill, in part because of new opportunities and because we know that an ever-growing number of food and farm policy stakeholders are eager to once again pursue reform in coming years.

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