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Subsidizing poor eating habits

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The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine posted on its Web site an easy-to-understand visual that shows which foods U.S. tax dollars go to support under the nation?s recently passed 2008 Farm Bill. Titled ?Why does a salad cost more than a Big Mac?? it depicts two pyramids -- subsidized foods together with the recommended food pyramid for optimum nutrition and health.

The two are almost inversely proportional to one another.

Fruits and vegetables are at the top for good nutrition; meat at the bottom. That meat -- the beef, pork and chicken -- is now raised and fattened on feedlots with a corn diet. Nearly every cow or chicken used in fast food is produced that way, prompting criticism of the government?s role in subsidizing poor eating habits.

Corn is central to U.S. agriculture, where it is grown in greater volumes and receives more government subsidies than any other crop. Between 1995 and 2006, corn growers received $56 billion in federal subsidies, and the annual figure may soon hit $10 billion. National food policies are shaped by the Farm Bill that is passed every five years in Congress.

In addition to encouraging unhealthy fast food consumption, cheap corn also contributes to overuse of chemical fertilizer and antibiotics, as well as food poisoning. Environmentalists have branded corn as an icon of unsustainable agriculture. It requires large amounts of fertilizer and pesticides, both of which require large amounts of fossil fuel to manufacture.

Most of the resulting corn is fed to livestock who didn?t evolve to subsist entirely on such a diet. In cattle, eating corn increases flatulence and emissions of methane -- a potent greenhouse gas -- and creates an intestinal environment rich in E. coli, an intestinal bacterium that is a common cause of food poisoning. That necessitates mixing cow feed with antibiotics, in turn producing antibiotic-resistant disease strains.

Five crops -- wheat, corn, rice, cotton, soybeans -- get 90 percent of all federal subsidies to agriculture. Two-thirds of U.S. food production -- including most fruits and vegetables -- remain unsubsidized.

This concentrates subsidies geographically as well. Fifteen states get 74 percent of the benefit from federal agriculture programs while paying only 24 percent of the cost. The Northeast gets a particularly bad deal, getting 2.4 percent of the benefit while paying 30 percent of the cost. The sole two Democrats who voted against the 2008 Farm Bill, with its continuation of massive subsidies to corn, soy and wheat growers, were from Rhode Island, a state not noted for its farm acreage.

Some of the ?luckiest? states are those that can help swing the results of national elections or that have powerful representatives in Congress. The 2002 Farm Bill gave the most money to Iowa, and the largest increase to Texas.

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