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EDITORIAL

Farm Belt Follies

The Senate has one last chance to rid the country of an irrational, outdated and unfair 70-year-old program of federal farm supports that enriches the few at the expense of the many, distorts international trade and damages the environment. It has one last chance, in other words, to produce a farm program of which the country can be proud.

Floor debate on the farm bill begins next week, possibly as early as Monday. The choice facing the Senate lies between an old-fashioned bill produced by the Senate Agriculture Committee and an entirely different bill that is expected to be offered as an amendment by Richard Lugar, the Indiana Republican, and Frank Lautenberg, Democrat of New Jersey.

The old-fashioned bill, which is only marginally better than a similarly retrograde measure approved earlier this year by the House, would perpetuate a system that directs more than half of all farm payments to less than one-tenth of the farms, most of them concentrated in eight states and most of them producers of big row crops like corn, cotton, soybeans, wheat and rice.

To make matters worse, these lucky few get their billions regardless of market conditions — and conditions now happen to be particularly good, given the strong demand for corn-based ethanol as well as for American farm products abroad. So whenever you hear its proponents describe this welfare-for-the-rich program as a safety net, remember this: for the most part, it provides an extra bounce for those who don't need a safety net while failing to catch those who do.

The Lugar-Lautenberg bill aims to correct this. It would replace existing subsidies with genuine crop insurance that would cover all farms, whether they produce rice or rutabaga. It would save \$20 billion over five years. And it would funnel the savings to valuable soil, open space and wetlands preservation programs, as well as the food stamps program — all of which could use the extra help.

The most visible enemies of such a sensible approach are all the farm state legislators from both parties who love things just the way they are. But an equally powerful enemy is plain old Congressional inertia. That makes the Lugar-Lautenberg amendment a long shot, but we hope they give it their best shot.

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