

Chapter 11

King Corn

Rural and Agricultural Geography

KING CORN, a feature-length (83-minute) documentary, records the yearlong journey of Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis. As an outreach tool, the film challenges audience members to think through the consequences of U.S. agricultural policies, our own eating habits and the intersections between the two.

U.S. Agriculture Policy Background

History

The first Farm Bills were passed under the New Deal, and were intended to bring agricultural supply and demand into balance by taking excess farmland out of production. These policies kept family farmers on the land, without flooding the market with cheap crops. In the 1970s, under the leadership of Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, the logic of Farm Bills shifted and began rewarding farmers for all-out production, encouraging "fencerow-to-fencerow" planting. The result was a series of record corn harvests and a market awash in cheap grain... often available below the cost of production.

Present

Every five to seven years, the U.S. Congress reauthorizes the Farm Bill. The complex legislation affects the nation's food system in a variety of ways: environmentally, commercially, agriculturally, and economically. What legislators rarely pay attention to, though, is the way the Farm Bill affects our food. In addition to determining which crops entitle farmers to subsidies and for what amounts, the Farm Bill deals with things like rural development, the school lunch program and biofuel development.

Recent results of U.S. agricultural policy include:

- U.S. taxpayers have provided more than \$50 billion in subsidies to corn farmers over the past decade.
- Between 2003 and 2005, 66% of crop subsidies went to 10% of farmers.
- Between 1997 and 2005, the industrial broiler chicken industry saved \$11.25 billion and the industrial hog industry saved \$8.5 billion from farm bill policies that kept corn and soybean prices below the cost of production.
- Over the past three decades, consumption of high fructose corn syrup has increased 1,000%.
- Between 1970 and 2007, the number of acres planted in corn in the U.S. increased by 39%.
- Between 1970 and 2007, Iowa's average yield of corn increased 109%, rising from 86 to 180 bushels per acre.
- In 2007, 92.9 million acres of farmland were devoted to growing corn. In contrast, 2 million acres were planted in vegetables.

Figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture "Milestones in U.S. Farming Policy"

	1900	1930	1945	1970	2000/02
Number of farms (in millions)	5.7	6.3	5.9	2.9	2.1
Avg farm size (in acres)	146	151	195	376	441
Avg. number of commodities produced per farm	5.1	4.5	4.6	2.7	1.3
Farm share of population (%)	39	25	17	5	1

Thinking More Deeply

Farming

1. What does it mean for the U.S. that the family farm is giving way to industrial or factory farming? What could reverse that trend?
2. The film traces the consolidation of small family farms into large farming operations, with single farms planting a thousand or more acres. Who benefits from, or is hurt by, this consolidation of farms?
3. Prior to viewing KING CORN, what image(s) came to mind when someone mentioned farms or farming? Did what you saw confirm or challenge that image? What did you learn from the film about current farming practices?

Agriculture Policy

4. Are you comfortable having your tax dollars support the farming practices and resulting food culture depicted in the film? Why or why not?
5. Americans now spend a smaller percentage of their income on food than ever before--less than 10% of their disposable income. What are the benefits and drawbacks of having cheap food available?
6. Would you be willing to pay more for food that was grown or raised in more healthy ways for people and/or for the environment? Why or why not? Do you currently purchase foods that are locally produced or organic, even though they are more expensive than food produced using commercial farming methods? Why or why not?