

Bobbi Wilson: Supply management, fair wages could drop government spending

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Farmers across the political spectrum say they would rather get a fair price from the marketplace than rely on government subsidies. Despite this distaste for government intervention, farmers received more than a third of their income from subsidies in 2019. This year, with COVID-19 causing global market disruptions, the farm bailouts keep coming. Most farmers I know don't want to depend on the government to stay afloat, but their farms can't survive commonly low and volatile commodity prices, much less an economic crisis.

This sentiment rings true for workers as well. Most workers would prefer the security of a good paycheck to the uncertainty of federal assistance. After a decade of worker strikes in the fight for a \$15 minimum wage, millions of workers still earn so little they rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP to feed their families). With the COVID-19 pandemic putting further financial strain on low-income families, the USDA temporarily increased monthly SNAP benefits for some. However, Congress rejected a longer-term increase during the pandemic after opponents warned against a moral hazard of government dependency.

Funding for SNAP has become a hot button political issue as conservative politicians seek to cut entitlement programs they say represent a burden on American taxpayers. The debates are fueled by the stigma that people on public assistance are lazy and undeserving. These stereotypes are rife with racial biases and trace back to the Reagan administration's depiction of the nefarious "welfare queen." Demonizing welfare recipients and blaming poverty on the poor are strategies meant to divide us by race and class, and distract from the systemic issue of economic inequality.

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The roots of income inequality are as deep as they are complex, but economic concentration is a driving force. For decades lawmakers have allowed a handful of corporate elites to rig the system in their own favor. They extract undue wealth from our economy to pad the pockets of executives and shareholders at the expense of farmers and working people. And the public is left to foot the bill. Our tax dollars should be used for services that benefit society — like transportation, healthcare, education, and a social safety net — not to compensate for artificially low farmgate prices and poverty wages paid by the private sector.

If our lawmakers are serious about reducing government dependency, they would embrace a living wage for all workers and profitable commodity prices for farmers.

Policies that improve prices for farmers, such as supply management, would significantly reduce government expenditures. And raising worker wages, which have been stagnant since the 1970's, would also reduce government spending on a whole host of public assistance programs from housing to nutrition. Most importantly, these policies would give more Americans the opportunity to lead a fulfilling and dignified life.

The COVID-19 pandemic is exactly the kind of scenario that calls for a taxpayer-funded public safety net. This crisis has revealed the vulnerability of an economic system designed for a wealthy few at the expense of the majority. Raising wages and farm income doesn't mean we would eliminate the need for nutrition assistance or agricultural subsidies altogether, but it would create a more resilient economy and a society better prepared to pull together in times of need.

Dairy farmers and organizations across the country are banding together to rebuild a viable dairy economy for family farmers and rural communities. Learn more at www.dairytogether.com.

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