

Crisis targets ag subsidies

By **LEN RICHARDSON**

If nothing else, the 2012 Farm Bill appears on a certain path to change—and that alone is change.

It is a debate about how much money to cut from the budget, rather than who gets the biggest chunk of federal farm subsidies. And with a congressional supercom-

Key Points

- Farm-bill debate is about how much money to cut from the budget.
- California's farm-bill focus is on providing food and nutrition.
- The supercommittee may make key farm-bill decisions for 2012.

mittee in play, decisions may be made in secrecy and elude farm-bill debates.

Indeed, the debate can be envisioned as between a hungry, skinny person and an obese, fat one. In fact, nutritious food and health has drawn attention to California, the largest farm economy in the nation, which is traditionally ignored in farm bills.

"What we'd like to see is a real shift in



ARS PHOTO BY SCOTT BAUER

SWITCH: California wants to see the farm bill switch subsidy money from commodity crops, like soybeans (shown here) and corn, to nutrition and conservation.

the subsidy money used for commodity crops to go to healthy food and conservation research," says Karen Ross, California's secretary of food and agriculture.

California's petition

In a petition the California Department of Food and Agriculture outlined the state's position on a farm bill:

"California produces more than 400 crops employing 800,000 people from the field to tables. California agriculture is a \$37.5 billion annual industry generating 12% of total U.S. agricultural revenue. California exports 23% of the products grown, making it a trading powerhouse."

California's priorities for the 2012 Farm Bill focus on:

- a renewed commitment to our farmers and ranchers
- meeting the nutritional needs of our population
- protecting the natural resource benefits of our working lands
- revitalizing local communities
- ensuring plant and animal health and safety

Health and nutrition focus

The farm bill is not just for farmers; it provides funds to grow promote and purchase safe and healthy foods, the petition says. It goes on to say, "California, one of only five Mediterranean growing regions in the world, is able to provide abundance of crops — over half the nation's fruits, nuts and vegetables alone. Today, with a renewed interest in nutrition and its role in preventing chronic disease, California's farms are even more important. This resurgence is building bridges between our food policy network, our rural communities and food deserts, between farms and urban environments, and between nutritionists and farmers, allowing us to achieve our goal of having California-grown healthy foods for all Californians and many Americans.

"Approximately 8 million Californians, or roughly 21% of the state's population, are eligible for food assistance programs. Statistics show that one in five Californians is at risk of hunger, and these numbers are likely to increase as we see increased need for food assistance by veterans and military personnel, the elderly and children. The importance of programs like The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) funding cannot be understated, as our food banks struggle in desperate times."

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