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To Kill A Clucking Bird

BY LISA HARE

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As a kid of 8 or 9, I worked helping my great aunt in the summertime, doing odd-jobs — mowing, picking cherries, working in the garden, canning, painting. My least favorite job was butchering chickens.



Lisa Hare

I was never overly fond (or trusting) of chickens after having been traumatized early on by my grandmother's big, demonic rooster, "Goldie."

The memory of the enormous fowl coming after me, wings flapping and spurs slicing, still floats up to haunt me now and then. I had been riding my tricycle at the time of the assault, making my way to the barn — a feat that was already monumentally difficult for a 3-year-old due to the deep sand in the drive.

But even after such terrorizing, it was still difficult for me to be involved in the decapitating process when it came time to butcher chickens.

All the rest, I could handle. The tediousness of plucking feathers; the gutting. I was OK with all that. It was just the killing part that bothered me.

And in the years I was away from country life, I'd all but forgotten the nasty details of the butchering process. I'd forgotten about headless bodies that flop and spasm, the stink of wet feathers, and the sausage-like innards that spill out in warm piles of yuck.

It was all a distant, hazy memory.

Until last Saturday. Back in May, in a flash of genius, I got this great idea that it'd be a good experience for the kids to raise some chickens to butcher. It would give them something to do this summer — a project. Responsibility. Work ethic. Follow-through. And, yes, a stark jolt of reality of where that certain type of protein originates, PETA be damned.

So I ordered 50 chicks, shored up the old chicken coop that had previously housed laying hens so it was peep-proof, and bought some feed.

Then the kids went to Grandma's for a visit — in Nevada.

For a month. So much for work ethic and responsibility for them. But every day as I did the chores before and after work, I consoled myself with the fact that the long-range plan was still intact and the kids would be home in time to get in on some of the work.

Last Saturday was B-day — or, butchering day.

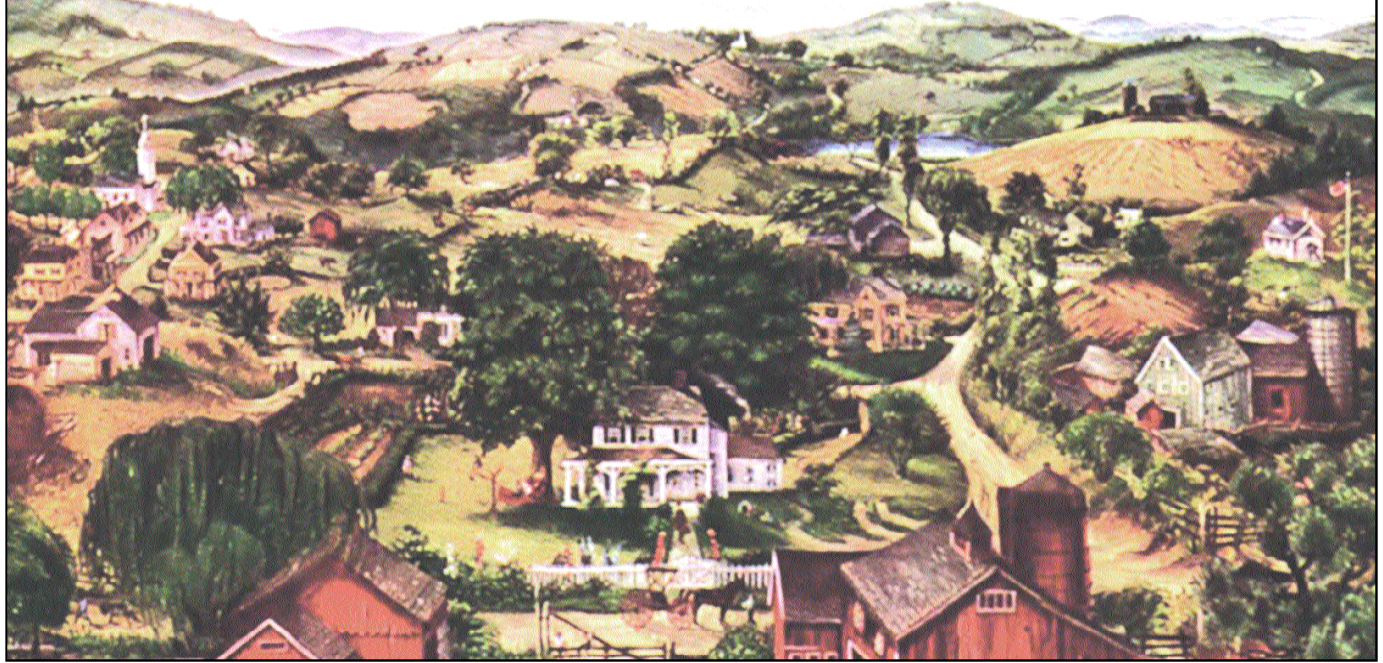
For old times' sake, I called my great aunt (who is getting ready for her 90th birthday party next week), and she came out to supervise the event and coach me and the friends and family I'd coerced into helping.

All things considered, it went pretty well. We worked all day and had a great dinner afterward — fresh-fried chicken, of course. And I don't know if my kids took any great lessons away from the experience or not.

I don't suppose butchering chickens will have a profound impact on their lives. And I doubt it's something that any of them will do themselves, as adults.

But then again, my great aunt might have thought those same things about me.

FARM BILL



Help Or Hindrance To Rural Development?

Research Suggests Federal Farm Program Payments Lead To Farm Consolidation And Depopulation Of America's Rural Communities

BY LISA HARE

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On July 27, the House of Representatives approved a farm bill by a vote of 231-191 that is projected to spend \$286 billion over five years. Among the many issues included in the bill, rural development is considered one of the most critical elements.

"Many rural communities know what they once were, they know what they're not anymore, but they're really struggling to figure out what they will be in the future," said Beth Davis, president for South Dakota Rural Enterprise.

When legislation to support farming was first crafted during the Great Depression, one in every four Americans lived on a farm. Thus, when farm prices received a boost, rural economies — and indeed, the U.S. economy — were boosted, as well.

But today, just one in every 750 people lives on a full-time farm. The idea that raising farm incomes will promote economic growth doesn't hold true anymore.

In fact, recent research conducted by Mark Drabenstott, vice president and director for the Center for the Study of Rural America, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, suggests direct federal payments to farmers actually weakens job gains and population growth in rural communities — two crucial elements to economic development.

Population decline remains one of the greatest economic and demographic challenges facing rural communities all across the nation. And the lower tax base resulting from depopulation leaves those communities without resources to retain and attract people and businesses. Many times, help is needed in the form of economic development programs.

"It's never just about dollars," Davis said. "Helping communities develop a vision for the future is essential, and providing on-going support for small businesses."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's mission for rural development is to help "improve the economy and quality of life in all of rural America."

And in the past, Congress has authorized and funded a variety of programs and grants aimed at bolstering withering rural economies, but recent research suggests other measures within the farm bill may be defeating those efforts.

Drabenstott's analysis of farm payments in relationship to rural economic growth suggests federal farm program payments create dependency on more payments, and do not provide new engines of growth for those communities.

"Simply put, commodity programs wed farming regions to an ongoing pattern of economic consolidation," he noted.

It is this consolidation and its adverse effects on rural communities that has

spurred opposition to current farm program payment structuring and provoked heated debate over payment limitations within the farm bill.

"We don't need to change the limits we have right now," said Chuck Hassebrook, executive director of the Center for Rural Affairs. "We just need to close the loopholes."

Currently, the payment limits for farmers are \$40,000 on direct payments, \$65,000 on counter-cyclical payments and \$75,000 on deficiency payments.

But larger operations exercising creative structuring by dividing into several farms on paper have been getting double the direct payment limit by using either the "three-entity rule" or the "spouse rule."

The three-entity rule allows an individual to receive double by drawing payments through one entity in which he/she owns 100 percent interest and two additional entities in which he/she owns 50 percent interest.

A married couple can receive double by each enrolling in the farm program. If one qualifies as actively engaged, the other also qualifies by participating in one significant farm decision annually.

"If we just close the loopholes, (current payment limitations) will work," Hassebrook said, adding that Congress needs to bring an end to the game-playing.

While many farm organizations such as the American Corn Growers Association and National Farmers Union are celebrating the modest revisions made in the House farm bill as a "first step in the right direction," others contend too many loopholes have been left unplugged.

"We're not talking about cutting the

payments that family farms receive, we're talking about putting caps on farm program payments so the biggest farms don't get more money to go out and drive more independent farmers off the land," said John Crabtree of the Center for Rural Affairs.

Under the House bill, the three-entity rule was eliminated, but the spouse rule not only remained in tact, but the payment limit was raised from \$40,000 to \$60,000.

It is legislated "non-reform" such as this that has rural development advocates aggrieved.

"The audacity of the representatives to come out and say this is a huge step

"We send these guys out to Washington to do the right thing, not the easy thing."

JOHN CRABTREE

toward reform is an insult to the people who have been working toward real reform," Crabtree said. "We send these guys out to Washington to do the right thing, not the easy thing."

With a plethora of issues to address toward reform is an amendment to impose stricter payment limitations didn't make it to the House floor for a vote.

"They were afraid that if they put a vote on the floor some of the members of the Ag Committee would vote against it," Crabtree said. "Then they'd have to go back to their districts and defend a position that would be unpopular. They did the easy thing to appease the big players."

Crabtree added that the final analysis of the House farm bill will result in bigger farms getting bigger, smaller farms getting fewer and poorer farmers in third world countries becoming poorer.

But President Bush has threatened a veto of the House bill based on tax provi-

sions added late in the game, and the Senate has yet to put in its two cents.

Ag Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) has said his committee will recommend a significantly different bill when the Senate picks up the debate in September.

"We have to work together to leverage resources and develop a common vision for the future that's different from the past," Davis said, adding that support for rural economic development remains key to rural communities surviving and thriving into the future.

"It's about change, grow or die," she said. "And it's foolish to try to save every community. It's important that we allocate resources to communities that are willing to grow their economies and be innovative."

But those concerned with the consolidation factor say rural development spending alone is not enough to save rural communities.

"I don't care how you frame it, more money (spent on farm program payments) that results in fewer farms and greater economic decline in rural communities will not benefit anybody," Crabree said.

Though Davis said she thought the farm bill was "on the right road," limiting subsidy payments would be a weaning process.

"It's going to go down kicking and screaming, but the fact that we've begun is a good thing," she said, adding that it's important for rural development programs to continue to do what they can for rural communities.

"I don't know if the political will (to support rural development) is there or not, but we're about to find out," she said.

A recent study conducted by the Center for Rural Affairs drew a comparison of USDA farm program payments to rural development funds in low population growth communities.

The study found that rural counties with the greatest population decline or lowest population growth received on average about \$53 per capita in federal rural development spending over a three-year period. Within a comparable three-year period, the top 20 farm program payment recipients received an average of more than \$1 million each.

SOUTH DAKOTA
Federal Farm Payments Received by Top 20 farms: **\$19,311,899**

Rural Development Spread Throughout 66 Municipalities: **\$12,105,854** (\$151.39 per capita.)

NEBRASKA
Federal Farm Payments Received by Top 20 farms: **\$25,773,276**

Rural Development Spread Throughout 67 municipalities: **\$4,296,851** (\$66.32 per capita.)