

The ADVOCATE

Government subsidizing fat, farm bill opponent says

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WESTPORT - Writer Daniel Imhoff, who recently published a citizen's guide to the farm bill, said he has a better name for it.

The legislation will set the country's farm and food policies for the next five years and is making its way through Congress.

"We should really call it the 'fat bill,' " Imhoff said to laughs during a forum on the bill yesterday at the Westport Country Playhouse.

He was referring to the part of the bill that provides large subsidies to producers of corn, cotton, rice, wheat, soybeans and other crops. Over the last 20 years, the cost of vegetables and other nutritious foods has gone up, and the cost of products with sugars and fatty oils has gone down, Imhoff said.

It is time for citizens to "vote with your fork" and fight for changes to the bill, which the U.S. House of Representatives will vote on this week, he said.

→ The forum, sponsored by Wholesome Wave LLC and the Dressing Room restaurant, both run by chef Michel Nischan, brought together experts on the bill, as well as those with opinions on it. The American Farmland Trust and the Northeast Midwest Institute also sponsored the event.

Annie Farrell, an advocate for organic farming and manager of Millstone Farm in Wilton, and Gus Schumacher, the undersecretary of farm and foreign agricultural services during the Clinton administration, also spoke.

U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-New Haven, chairwoman of the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, introduced the panel by speaking about changes she and other legislators have made to the farm bill. There is funding for grants for specialty crops, nutrition programs and increases in the standard deduction for federal food stamps, among other things, she said.

But more needs to be done, DeLauro said. For example, the Agriculture Department gave \$1.1 billion in payments to deceased farmers over seven years, something Congressional investigators confirmed yesterday.



The farm bill, which dates to the 1930s and was intended to protect small farmers, didn't always provide direct payments, Imhoff said. Help then came mostly from loans.

Nischan, who advocates locally grown food and sustainable farming practices, recounted how as a child working on his grandfather's farm in Missouri he overheard relatives talking about the problems farmers face, and learned more as a restaurant owner.

Farmer's markets are popping up across the area, but more can be done, Nischan said. The government could provide incentives for people to eat healthier, perhaps by giving a discount for buying locally grown produce with food stamps.

"Pick the things in the farm bill that mean the most to you and e-mail congressmen about where you want your tax . . . money to go," Nischan said.

Members of the audience, who paid up to \$25 to attend the event, which included a reception at the Dressing Room, included activists, chefs, farmers and residents.

Jean Crum Jones, who runs Jones Family Farms in Shelton with her husband, Terry, said it's a good idea to bring the farm bill to people's attention.

As a farmer, Jones said she knows about the problems with the bill. As a nutritionist, she worries about the growing obesity epidemic. People are becoming more thoughtful about the food they buy, she said, but they also have to make demands of the government.

"It is now in the hands of the citizens to speak up," Jones said. "Everyone needs to realize they have a stake in this."

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