

Off-Base, Part 5: Farm Policy Has Been Here Before; Lessons Reinforced by History

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Maybe history offers handrails in turbulent times. History recycles rather than repeats but sometimes the difference is tough to distinguish. Like handrails, how we use history—or if we bother to use it at all—is a choice with consequences. Picking up where last week left off, today's article delves a bit deeper into history with potential relevance to the base acre discussion (*farmdoc daily*, [January 15, 2026](#); [January 22, 2026](#); [January 29, 2026](#); [February 12, 2026](#)).

Farm policy has been here before. In the 1950s and 1960s, the fundamental flaws in the parity system policy, especially the design and operation of acreage allotments, permitted federally subsidized acreage diversion from cotton and wheat into corn. The additional acres of corn and other feed grains spread surplus problems to those crops, markets, and farmers. The regional and commodity conflict that resulted tore apart the farm coalition, sunk the Farm Bill in 1962, and required the Food Stamp Act in 1964 for continued political viability in Congress.

How did the farm coalition self-destruct in 1962? The answer begins with flawed farm policy; or to be more precise, it was the result of farm policy that failed to adjust and adapt to changes on the ground and in agriculture. World War II, of course, was the primary catalyst of change. After the war, American agriculture entered a period of rapid technological change that included mechanization (especially in cotton), new hybrid seeds, new synthetic fertilizers, and new herbicides. Farm policy, however, remained locked to the New Deal parity system in which farmers took out price supporting loans on individual commodities at high, fixed loan rates (90% of parity). If market prices were below loan rates, farmers forfeited the commodity without penalty.

Importantly, as a condition of the loan farmers agreed to abide by acreage allotments and marketing quotas. Acreage allotments were commodity specific. If the allotment required farmers to reduce acres planted to one commodity (e.g. cotton or wheat), they diverted the acres above the allotment to other commodities (e.g., corn or feed grains). Of course, acreage diverted to corn or feed grains also took

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advantage of the technological advancements that substantially increased yields, magnifying the impact of each added acre.

Farm policy, especially acreage policy, made multiple problems for farmers worse. The consequences of that policy that did not adjust to changes on the ground. It helped feed massive grain surpluses forfeited to USDA. Congress did not adjust or revise the policy and, in fact, the Southern faction in Congress resisted any changes or revisions as demonstrated by the Soil Bank, the one real attempt at innovating policy during this era. Rather than divert acres to other crops, the Soil Bank diverted them into conservation—either annually in the acreage reserve or for multiple years in the conservation reserve. While it continued acreage reduction policy to address surplus supplies at a time of technological change, it at least addressed the acreage diversion problems and delivered conservation benefits to boot.

The point of this policy alternative was made clear in a hearing with the House Agriculture Committee by Melvin Gelbach, a witness from Illinois who helped create the policy and led the push for it. He told the committee, “you cotton boys in the South” were putting “your diverted acres into crops in competition with certain grains in our area” (1954 House Agriculture Committee Hearing, Part 21, at 3931). In the Senate, Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Allen Ellender (D-LA), complained that “the corn grower will get a bonanza . . . able to have its cake and eat it too” calling the crop the “fair-haired boy” that “always had a high standing in the price support program” (*Congressional Record*, March. 9, 1956, at 4379). Opponents of the Soil Bank, such as Senator Richard Russell (D-GA), operated on the “theory that if agriculture must go down the drain, all components of it ought to go down together, and let the corn farmers feel what has been done to the producers of other commodities in other sections of the country” (*Congressional Record*, March 9, 1956, at 4385). Southerners nearly proved the theory.

Enactment of the Soil Bank proved difficult in 1956 and was achieved only after President Eisenhower vetoed the first version. It was also late with respect to spring planting and struggled with other inherited challenges. Southerners in Congress retaliated and didn’t give the policy much of a chance to succeed. Representative Jamie Whitten (D-MS), and chairman of the USDA appropriations subcommittee led an effort to sabotage the program through appropriations, mostly by cutting its funding and challenging its implementation. In 1957, he told USDA officials appearing before his appropriations subcommittee that “I think the soil bank, and I am saying it from my heart, as it is now administered, is the worst thing that ever happened to the American farmer” (1957 House Ag Appropriations Hearing, at 42). Representative August H. Andresen (R-MN) responded to attacks on the program noting that “[n]ow before the law has had a fair chance to operate, they want to destroy it” with dishonest claims (*Congressional Record*, May 15, 1957, at 7025). The tactic proved effective tactic against the Soil Bank. After barely two years in operation, the Eisenhower Administration surrendered in 1958, requesting Congress end the acreage reserve program for the 1959 crop year (Coppess, 2024; *farmdoc daily*, [January 9, 2020](#); [January 24, 2020](#); [February 20, 2020](#)).

Sabotaging the Soil Bank did little to alleviate real problems. It didn’t help Congress either, as the conflict over acreage diversion worsened and the coalition deteriorated further. In 1958, for example, Congress sought to prevent any reductions in support prices or acreage allotments. Representative Bob Michel (R-IL) raised concerns about “the extraordinary benevolent attitude the Congress has taken with respect to such crops as cotton, tobacco, rice and peanuts” and provocatively asked whether “we are still being asked to pay reparations to the South for the Civil War” (*Congressional Record*, March 20, 1958, at 4923). President Eisenhower vetoed that bill (*Congressional Record*, March. 21, 1958, at 5757-58). When Congress finally enacted legislation in 1958, it had to address concerns about policy that “takes care of the major commodities of the South,” according to Representative H. Carl Andersen (R-MN), “and does nothing worthwhile for the family-farms of the Midwest” (*Congressional Record*, August 14, 1958, at 17626-31). One result was to provide corn farmers the ability to vote themselves out of the parity system, which they did overwhelmingly in 1959 (Coppess, 2018).

In the first months of the Kennedy Administration, Southerners in Congress responded, enacting a special acreage reduction policy on feed grain farmers in the Midwest with the 1961 Emergency Feed Grains Act. Interestingly, the policy was a recycling of the Soil Bank’s acreage reserve that Southerners had sabotaged—acres diverted from planting and into conservation—but it was designed only for corn and other feed grains. It was a “dangerous and unwarranted delegation of the power to intentionally destroy the corn and sorghum markets,” according to Representative Charles B. Hoeven (R-IA), who added that it “represents a real threat to the continuation of a market economy for agriculture” (*Congressional Record*, March 8, 1961, at 3667). The 1961 legislation contributed directly to the meltdown in 1962.

The extent of the deterioration is clear in a sample of the comments during the Congressional debates. In 1962, Senator Allen Ellender (D-LA) and chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee called corn the “little blue-eyed girl of our program” (*Congressional Record*, May 21, 1962, at 8785) and Senator Russell alleged that Midwestern farmers “have had their cake and have been eating it, too” (*Congressional Record*, May 23, 1962, at 8997). And yet, Chairman Ellender also acknowledged that there was “no doubt that the cotton farmers of the South have increased the production of crops which used to be produced as cash crops principally in the North” (*Congressional Record*, May 21, 1962, at 8785-9182). The acknowledgement did not alter the policy or the politics. Senator Herman Talmadge (D-GA) called for putting “feed grains under the same type of mandatory controls which have been successfully employed for years by the producers of cotton, rice, peanuts and tobacco” (*Congressional Record*, May 23, 1962, at 8996-97). Representative Harold Cooley, Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, told the House that “I think that all of us from the South should be willing and eager to give the farmers of the Great Midwest and elsewhere the same opportunity that we have with crops we produce” (*Congressional Record*, June 19, 1962, at 10956).

Midwestern responses were full of frustration at the policy and Southern power plays. Senator William Proxmire (D-WI) argued that the “feed grain surplus is in large part the result of the previous wheat and cotton programs . . . and it seems to me unfair, to blame the corn farmer for his production, because it is a fact that the wheat and cotton programs of the Federal Government have pushed more acreage into feed grain production” (*Congressional Record*, May 23, 1962, at 8997-98). Senator Karl Mundt (R-SD) attacked Southerners “who are determined to impose these new restrictions upon us, who suddenly have become infatuated with the idea of strict Government controls, that they are flirting with a dangerous undertaking which is certain to come back to plague them later” (*Congressional Record*, May 24, 1962, at 9198). Senator Karl Mundt (R-SD) warned that “one man’s medicine can be another’s poison” (*Congressional Record*, May 22, 1962, at 8950).

Similarly, in the House, Representative Bob Dole (R-KS) pointed out that “[i]t does not take any mental giant or an economist to figure who takes the brunt of the farm bill here. It is the Midwestern farmer. They are going to cut his feed grain and wheat acreage and still raise his income, so they say” (*Congressional Record*, June 20, 1962, at 11197). Representative Albert Quie (R-MN) noted that “every time those [cotton] farmers cut back their production of that commodity they did not cut total production, they put those acres into feed grains, so they were still raising crops from fence row to fence row,” and had not actually “accepted regimentation and controls” because when “the cotton farmer reduced production he planted feed grains and as much as he wanted” (*Congressional Record*, June 20, 1962., at 11172-75). For the final words on the controversial 1962 debate, Representative Paul Findley (R-IL) argued that the bill was “[m]ore of the same nonsense, more of the same interference with the private enterprise system” and created “the same type of briar patch in which Billie Sol Estes operated in the land of cotton” (*Congressional Record*, June 20, 1962, at 11189). It was Representative Findley’s motion to recommit the legislation that officially defeated the Farm Bill. The final vote was 215 to 205 (17 not voting) (*Congressional Record*, June 21, 1962, at 11383-84).

Concluding Thoughts

History of the breakdown in the 1950s and 1960s should reinforce key lessons about failing to fix fundamental flaws in farm policy. Subsidies designed on a commodity-by-commodity basis are a recipe for problems and policies that drive acreage shifts can be politically explosive. Farmers would be less likely to plant for any one commodity if payments are not commodity specific. In times of turbulent markets, moreover, farmers need policies that help them adjust and adapt. Although they can be controversial, or present their own problems, farmers could be better served by policies that temporarily divert acres out of production or otherwise seek to alleviate market pressures and the tensions of regional competition. Today, chaos and incoherence continue to consume geopolitics and markets. The Renewable Fuels Standard (RFS) offers the illusion of safety and is likely to drive decisions in favor of planting corn and soybeans. As night follows day, more acres in those crops will increase supplies and drive down prices. Lower prices harm all farmers who produce those crops, but farmers with southern base acres will be insulated by high payment rates while total program spending will likely keep costs high, if not drive them higher.

Congress, however, appears intent on repeating the problems. In the House, a recycled bill of mostly leftover programs fixes none of the problematic changes contained in the Reconciliation Farm Bill (House Agriculture Committee, [Farm Bill](#); *Farm Policy News*, [February 16, 2026](#)). Among them are the massive

payment rates on southern crop base acres and the ability for the largest operations to multiply payments with the legal fictions of pass-through entities (*farmdoc daily*, August 21, 2025; September 4, 2025). The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), for example, could provide an alternative and a potential release valve on acreage challenges. The House legislation, unfortunately, takes none of the current realities into consideration and would merely extend the arbitrary 27-million acreage cap and other problems in the program's design.

Here again we are reminded that history's handrails offer only help, and only if properly used. The lessons of the past are not self-executing in the present. Better policies require substantial political will because the competition in Congress is overwhelmingly stacked in favor of the status quo and the smallest factional interests. It is too easy for them to prevent adjustments and block fixes to problematic policies. When that happens, the only other thing history provides is the elimination of excuses. Looking up at the handrails when we fall, we cannot pretend we didn't know or could not have known.

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