

## From Field to Fitness: Aligning Farm Policy with Health Policy to Improve Nutrition & Health

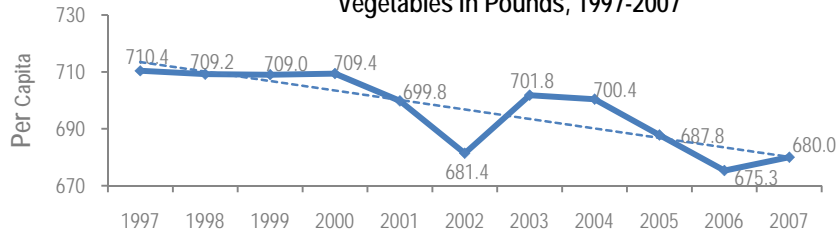
September 2010

### ■ Introduction

This issue brief summarizes the analysis of the influence of the federal Farm Bill on nutrition and health contained in the full report *From Field to Fitness: Aligning Farm Policy with Health Policy to Improve Nutrition and Health*. The complete report, including references, can be found on the Center for Mississippi Health Policy's web site at [www.mshealthpolicy.com](http://www.mshealthpolicy.com).

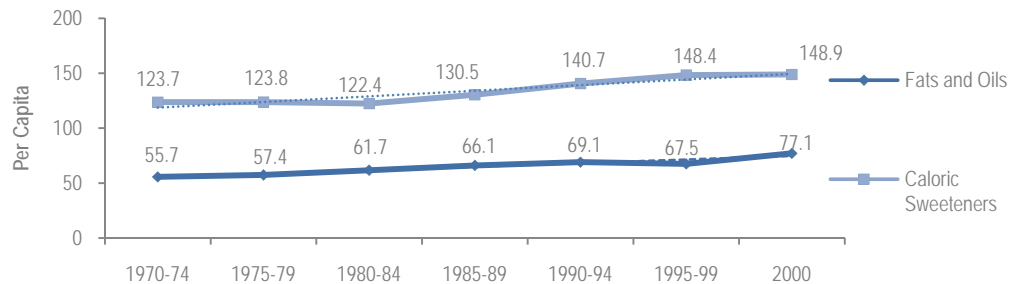
Ample consumption of fruits and vegetables is important for growth and development, as well as prevention of chronic disease. Yet, few Americans eat enough of them to meet nutrition and disease protection needs, and Mississippi adults report the lowest intake of fruits and vegetables. While health experts encourage the population to eat more fruits and vegetables and limit consumption of sugars and fats, adult eating patterns show the opposite trend (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: United States Average Consumption Per Capita of Fruits & Vegetables in Pounds, 1997-2007



Source: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2010.

Figure 2: United States Average Per Capita Consumption Caloric Sweeteners and Fats and Oils in Pounds, 1974-2000



Source: Putnam, Allshouse, & Kantor, 2002.

Increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables is consequently an important component in any attempt to improve the nutritional status and health of Mississippians. This goal is difficult to obtain without addressing the accessibility and affordability of fruits and vegetables in the state, which ultimately leads to an examination of federal farm policies that directly impact the cost and availability of these foods.

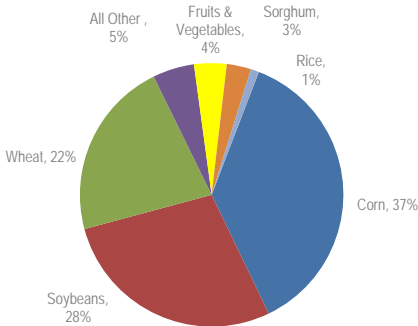
The United States Congress is scheduled to reauthorize the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act (Public Law 110-246), referred to as the “Farm Bill,” in 2012. The policies set forth in the bill shape what foods are grown or are available in the nation, thus greatly affecting nutrition and consequently the health status of Americans.

■ Commodity Programs

Title I of the Farm Bill governs federal income support programs for farmers, including those commonly known as subsidies. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issues subsidy payments to eligible producers on farms through two programs: the Direct and Counter-cyclical Payment Programs. Payments for both types of programs are calculated using formulas that are based on the amount of acreage that was used to grow crops during a particular time period. Food crops receiving subsidy payments under the Farm Bill include the following commodities primarily: corn, wheat, soybeans, rice, and sorghum. Specialty crops, such as fruits, vegetables, and tree nuts are not eligible for these commodity income support programs.

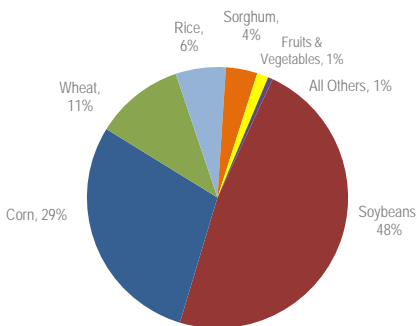
Research findings indicate that farmers decide which commodity crops to plant largely based on the greatest expected flow of subsidy payments. Food commodity crops qualifying for Farm Bill subsidy payments represent the majority of the cropland harvested in Mississippi, as well as in the nation.

Figure 3: Distribution of U.S. Food Crop Area Harvested in 2007 by Type of Crop



Source: United States Department of Agriculture, National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2009.

Figure 4: Distribution of MS Food Crop Area Harvested in 2007 by Type of Crop



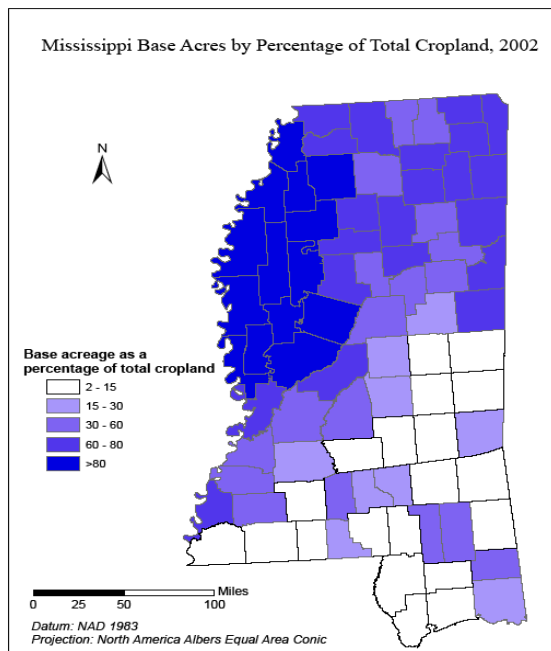
Source: United States Department of Agriculture, National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2009.

Farmers receiving subsidy payments are not obligated to produce the same commodity crop planted previously. In fact, farmers may grow other crops or keep land fallow while receiving subsidies, except that farmers receiving these subsidy payments may not plant fruits, certain nuts, vegetables, or wild rice. Farmers growing fruits and vegetables on land qualifying for subsidies will incur penalties for doing so. Subsidy payments are reduced for each acre of fruits and vegetables planted, and the farmer is assessed a financial penalty based on the market value of the fruits and vegetables produced.

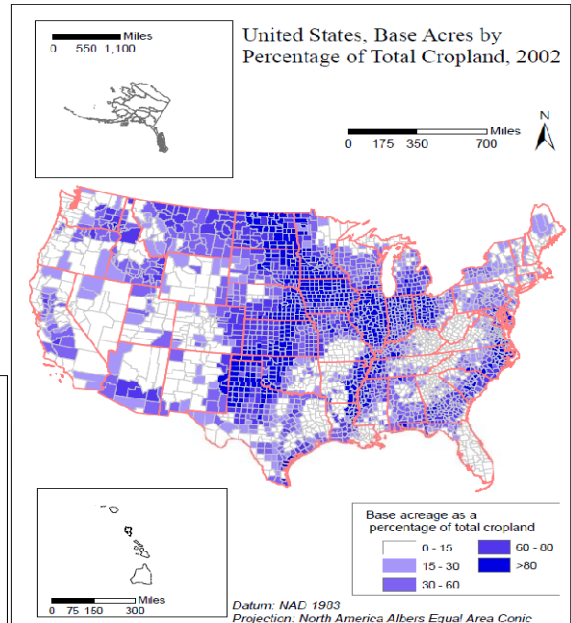
## Federal Restrictions on Planting Fruits & Vegetables

Researchers with the Economic Research Service of USDA mapped cropland areas designated as base acres for federal subsidies (**Figure 5**). The researchers point out that these base acre areas are currently at a disadvantage for growing fruits and vegetables due to federal planting restrictions and could possibly be used for growing fruits and vegetables if federal restrictions were lifted.

**Figure 6**



**Figure 5**



Source: Young, Johnson, Krissoff, & Lucier, *Amber Waves* Vol. 5, Issue 1, 2007. Maps prepared by the GIS and Remote Sensing Program at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, 2010.

In Mississippi, approximately 2.3 million acres are subject to these planting restrictions, which represent about 70 percent of the acreage growing commodity crops in 2008 (**Figure 6**). In order for each person to consume a healthy diet recommended by the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans, an increase in growth of fruits and vegetables and a shift in wheat grains would be necessary to

meet demand. Researchers estimate that about 7.4 million additional acres, a net growth of 1.7 percent total cropland nationwide, would be required to meet these fruit, vegetable, and whole grain needs.

## Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

The largest nutrition program governed by the Farm Bill is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly referred to as the Food Stamp Program. In 2009, over thirty-three million Americans were enrolled in SNAP, about eleven percent of the U.S. population. Almost half of American children and ninety percent of African American children participate in SNAP at some point in their lives. In Mississippi, over half a million persons participated in SNAP in 2009, approximately 17 percent of the population.

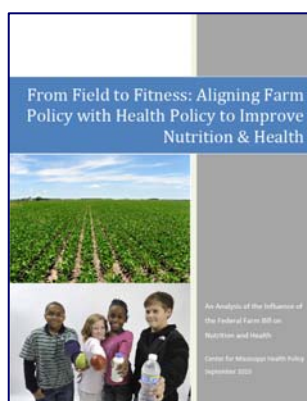
Some researchers have demonstrated a link between SNAP program participation and increased body weight, particularly for women, but the topic remains subject to further investigation. Studies also indicate a possible association between the timing of SNAP benefit distribution and metabolic effects of “feast or famine” that cause weight gain. Another concern about SNAP relates to the use of benefits to purchase unhealthy foods and beverages, particularly foods of minimal nutritional value.

Nutrition education for SNAP participants, termed SNAP-Ed, has shown to be effective in improving eating patterns for SNAP participants. Regulatory restrictions on the use of SNAP-Ed funds, however, limit the programs flexibility and scope.

## ■ Policy Options

Many health organizations have offered policy recommendations for consideration as the Farm Bill is reauthorized. The following is a summary of key policy options that are consistent with the research compiled in the full report:

- Make increasing the affordability and quality of nutrient-dense foods a stated goal of farm policy.
- Use federal nutrition recommendations as guidelines for U.S. agricultural production needs and production controls.
- Remove planting restrictions and penalties against growing fruits and vegetables from at least enough acreage participating in subsidy programs to produce adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables to meet dietary guidelines.
- Allow all regions of the country to participate in planting flexibility projects and simplify the participation process.
- Allow farmers to opt out of the federal farm subsidy program on a yearly basis to raise fruits and vegetables without penalties.
- Provide greater incentives to families to purchase nutritious foods through SNAP, such as discounts to enable purchase of more fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grain products.
- Restrict use of SNAP benefits from purchasing foods of minimal nutritional value.
- Allow states the option through a waiver of SNAP regulations to set stricter standards for foods that can be purchased through the program.
- Provide SNAP benefits on a bimonthly rather than a monthly basis.
- Allow use of SNAP-Ed funds in states with high SNAP participation to conduct marketing campaigns directed at low-income households that promote healthy eating and increased consumption of fruits and vegetables.
- Allow SNAP-Ed programs to provide nutrition education that discourages SNAP participants from eating unhealthy foods.
- Remove restrictions on SNAP-Ed programs providing breastfeeding education.
- Allow states more flexibility in using SNAP and SNAP-Ed data in a secure and confidential manner to determine the effectiveness of SNAP-Ed nutrition education.
- Expand the availability of wireless devices to farmers' markets and other retailers who lack the means to use a wired Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) device for SNAP benefits.
- Expand the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program to reach more eligible school-age children.
- Increase availability of fruits and vegetables to school-age children through commodity programs that provide food for School Lunch and Breakfast Programs as well as after-school and summer feeding programs.



The complete report is available at [www.mshealthpolicy.com](http://www.mshealthpolicy.com)

Center for Mississippi  
Health Policy

Plaza Building, Suite 700  
120 N. Congress Street  
Jackson, MS 39201  
Phone 601.709.2133  
Fax 601.709.2134  
[www.mshealthpolicy.com](http://www.mshealthpolicy.com)