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EDITORIAL

## Misguided Budget Cuts

Facing record deficits, the White House is understandably seeking places to cut the federal budget. May we suggest that there are better things to cut than the conservation programs in the farm bill? If farm programs have to bear a proportionate share of the cuts — and they should — there are far-less-deserving farm subsidies that could be chopped without serious harm to anyone except a few well-off farmers.

The 2008 farm bill was a mediocre piece of work tailored, as always, to the needs of big agriculture. Congress earmarked much of the \$307 billion, five-year price tag for subsidies that have been around since the New Deal and tend to reward big producers of big row crops like corn, soybeans and wheat.

The good news was that Congress (at the urging of President Bush, who was reform-minded on agriculture) also authorized [a](#) 4 billion increase in programs aimed at helping to preserve wetlands, open space and habitat for wildlife. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has targeted several of these programs for \$600 million in cuts.

Mr. Vilsack says he selected them only because his department does not have the administrative capacity to distribute the extra money. That lame explanation has so far impressed no one; last week, a House subcommittee rejected the administration's proposed cuts, leaving the conservation programs largely intact. But dangers lie ahead in the Senate, historically less enthusiastic than the House about conservation spending.

Except for during the Bush years, the Agriculture Department's environmental programs have always been vulnerable to budget cuts. It is depressing to see the Obama administration revert to old patterns, especially when there are better candidates for the budgetary blade. The most obvious of these is the indefensible program of "direct payments" — subsidies amounting to \$5 billion a year based on acreage and past production that flow automatically to farmers in good times and bad.

A modest 10 percent cut in those payments would have little impact on the great majority of farmers. It would give Mr. Vilsack most of the \$600 million in cuts he says he needs. It would not hurt the environment. This is clearly the way to go.

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