



This little piggy went to market

By Jim Waters

Finding better ways to get products to market dominates most discussions about farming in America.

Perhaps we need more talk about getting the market — as in “free market” — back to the farm.

My late grandfather, a tobacco farmer, also raised dairy cattle and grew the family food. Folks today would not consider granddaddy wealthy. But to my siblings and me, he was a gold mine.

He let us ride his tractor, milk cows and joined us in spitting seeds out of the biggest, juiciest watermelons you ever saw. The homegrown watermelons (of course) sprouted in the rich, sandy soil across the two-lane highway near he and my grandmother lived next to, an hour inland from North Carolina’s coast.

Every year, granddaddy would harvest his tobacco and take it down to those big, oddly shaped barns with their own special sweet-tobacco aroma. Buyers would rub their chins thoughtfully while walking up and down long rows among piles of leafy tobacco and make decisions that affected granddaddy and many other families much more than I realized at the time.

Some years worked out better than others for granddaddy. But no matter what happened, I never heard him complain and run to find some government handout.

I wish Kentucky Farm Bureau Federation President Marshall Coyle could have known my grandfather. The he wouldn’t push so hard for overburdened taxpayers to subsidize profitable farmers.

“Sometimes mischaracterized as a subsidy program for large-scale corporate farms, the nation’s farm policy actually goes a long way toward providing a sense of economic stability in rural communities,” Coyle wrote in a recent letter to the editor published in the Kentucky Gazette. “And it does so with a broad reach.”

That “broad reach” stretches from the hands of many farmers right into the wallets of taxpayers. A recent Cato Institute study estimated that the last 20 years of federal farm programs have cost taxpayers and consumers around \$1.7 trillion. And that’s just the past two decades.

Most politicians understand the problem with subsidies. But they keep the government checkbook open and their mouths shut. They fear politically formidable groups with wealthy constituents. The AARP gets ticked when anyone even mentions reforming Social Security, and “farm interests,” as Coyle labels them, squawk like roosters over threats to their welfare checks.

Subsidies have become a runaway train:

- Taxpayers for Common Sense reports that the number of millionaires receiving farm subsidies rose 28 percent between 2000 and 2001 alone.
- The Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit research body, reports that 71 percent of farm

subsidies go to the top-10 percent of subsidy beneficiaries. Of the 78 farms that received more than \$1 million in subsidies in 2002, not a single one could be considered small or struggling.

- The “Farm-o-crats” claim these handouts help small, struggling farms. Really? Why, then, did Bickett Farms in Central City get nearly \$1.3 million in farm subsidies in 2005 alone while the bottom 80 percent of farmers got an average of only \$846? Bickett Farms collected \$7.1 million in taxpayer-funded handouts between 1995 and 2005.

What chance do small, struggling farmers like my granddaddy have against corporate heavyweights like Caterpillar Inc., International Paper Co. and others, which currently get hundreds of thousands in subsidies? As food prices skyrocket, why does Archer Daniels Midland Co. continue to reap farm subsidies?

Shame on Coyle for fertilizing his argument for continuing taxpayer-funded handouts to wealthy farmers by pointing to the recent ill-advised “economic-stimulus” package approved by Congress. Instead of whining that everyone else gets theirs and farmers should get theirs, too, the spirit of self-reliance displayed by my grandfather demands a different response.

That response condemns subsidies and “economic stimulus” and calls for farmers to innovate, save and seek their rewards from the marketplace, not Congress.

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