

FOOD SYSTEMS - POLICY PRIMER

Prepared by Catch Fire Movement

Consolidating power within the U.S. food system has led to significant issues, including diminished competition, regulatory capture, environmental hazards, and deteriorating labor conditions. A handful of corporations dominate the pork, beef, dairy, grains, coffee, berries, and grocery retail sectors. This concentration has resulted in higher consumer prices, reduced choices, and the erosion of family farms. The increasing consolidation of these industries has occurred under both Republican and Democratic administrations. A critical aspect of this issue is the revolving door between regulatory agencies and the industries they oversee.

Tom Vilsack's tenure as Secretary of Agriculture exemplifies this concern. After serving as Secretary from 2009 to 2017 in the Obama administration and presiding over the rapid consolidation of the scandal-ridden meatpacking industry, Vilsack became the CEO of the U.S. Dairy Export Council, a lobbying organization for the dairy industry at a salary of nearly one million dollars a year. Reappointed as Secretary of Agriculture by President Biden, his return to the USDA in 2021 raised questions about potential conflicts of interest and the influence of corporate agriculture on policy decisions. Critics argue that such movements between regulatory roles and industry positions undermine the integrity of the USDA and contribute to policies favoring large agribusinesses over small farmers and consumers. Labor conditions in large processing plants further illustrate the consequences of industry consolidation. Workers in these facilities often face hazardous environments, low wages, and limited job security. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these vulnerabilities, with numerous outbreaks occurring in meatpacking plants. This highlighted the industry's prioritization of production over worker safety. Under President Trump, the speed of the pork kill lines was increased until the courts ruled it unlawful because it did not take worker safety into account.

Not surprisingly, given his history, Secretary Vilsack later revived the policy of allowing six pork plants to increase their speed as part of a pilot program. The differences between Democratic and Republican Presidents and their appointments can be minimal regarding their support for corporate monopolies.

The concentration of power in the food system also has devastating environmental consequences. Industrial agriculture, dominated by a few powerful corporations, prioritizes short-term profits over ecological sustainability. Monocropping, driven by corporate interests, depletes soil health, increases pesticide use, and reduces biodiversity. Factory farms, controlled by agribusiness giants, produce massive amounts of waste, polluting water sources and contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, consolidating the supply chain discourages regenerative farming practices, which are critical for mitigating climate change and rebuilding ecosystems. Addressing corporate dominance in agriculture is essential for transitioning to a sustainable food system that protects the planet for future generations.

To address these systemic issues, progressive members of Congress could introduce several policy measures:

1. **Strengthening Antitrust Enforcement:** Implement stricter antitrust laws to prevent monopolistic practices and promote competition within the food industry. This could involve breaking up large agribusinesses and preventing mergers that reduce market competition.
2. **Revolving Door Restrictions:** Enforce stricter regulations on the movement of individuals between regulatory agencies and the industries they regulate to prevent conflicts of interest and ensure unbiased policymaking.
3. **Labor Protections:** Enhance labor laws to improve working conditions in processing plants, including enforcing safety standards, ensuring fair wages, and protecting workers' rights to unionize.
4. **Support for Small Farmers:** Increase funding and resources for small and independent farmers to promote diversity in food production and reduce reliance on large agribusinesses. This could include subsidies, access to markets, and technical assistance.
5. **Transparency in Food Production:** Mandate greater transparency in food production processes, including labeling and sourcing information, to empower consumers and hold corporations accountable.
6. **Support for Regenerative Agriculture Practices:** Incentivize regenerative agriculture by providing subsidies, tax credits, and grants to farmers implementing sustainable practices such as cover cropping, crop rotation, no-till farming, and agroforestry. These methods restore soil health, reduce dependence on chemical inputs, and enhance carbon sequestration. Redirect funds from programs subsidizing environmentally destructive industrial farming to those promoting regenerative practices. Federal programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) could be expanded to prioritize sustainability-focused farmers.
7. **Enforce Stronger Environmental Regulations on Agribusiness:** Strengthen regulations to hold large agribusinesses accountable for their environmental impacts. This includes stricter oversight of factory farms (CAFOs) to manage waste and prevent water pollution, enforcing limits on pesticide and fertilizer runoff, and implementing robust penalties for violations. Additionally, mandate emissions reductions from agricultural operations and require transparency in reporting environmental impacts. Policies could also support transitioning CAFOs to less intensive, more sustainable livestock systems, reducing their environmental footprint while supporting worker and community health.

By implementing these policies, Congress can work towards a more equitable, sustainable, and competitive food system that benefits consumers, workers, and small farmers.

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Recommended book: *Barons: Money, Power, and the Corruption of America's Food Industry* by Austin Frerick