

February 2024

The Ever Expanding Farm Bill

Costs of Farm Bills Greatly Exceed Initial Projections

Farm bills routinely cost more than advertised. The Congressional Budget Office’s (CBO) [February 2024](#) baseline confirms this truism. Advertised as an \$867 billion bill, the programs authorized in the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 are now projected to cost taxpayers approximately \$1.3 trillion. Lawmakers contemplating a farm bill in 2024 must take pause. Taxpayers can afford to provide cost-effective farm financial and nutrition safety nets. We cannot afford wasteful farm bill programs that run on autopilot. Meanwhile, programs assisting agricultural producers adopting risk-reducing conservation practices come in under-budget, and spending on commodity, crop insurance & disaster programs are not only over-budget, but outnumber farm bill-authorized conservation spending 3 to 1.

The Path to Trillion Dollar+ Farm Bills

Since 2002, farm bill spending has exploded. The official 10-year CBO score at adoption for farm bill legislation more than doubled between 2002 and 2014. Improved economic conditions, and thus anticipated reductions in “safety net” programs, resulted in a CBO score of \$867 billion for the 2018 farm bill. This fiscal optimism, however, was short-lived.

Farm Bills Increase in Cost Over Time		
Farm Bill	10-Year Projected Cost	% Increase from Previous Legislation
2002 Farm Bill	\$451 billion	
2008 Farm Bill	\$641 billion	42%
2014 Farm Bill	\$956 billion	49%
2018 Farm Bill	\$867 billion	-9%
2024 Farm Bill (May 2023 baseline)	\$1.510 billion (estimate)	74%

Farm Bill Costs Greater Than They Appear

Like the monster in the sideview mirror, actual costs of farm bills are greater than projected costs appear. When outlays (actual spending) on farm bill authorized programs are compared to projected costs at the time of the farm bill’s authorization, massive cost overruns are seen. (*Please note that FY24-28 costs are projected in the table below).

Projected and Actual Costs of Recent Farm Bills				
Farm Bill	10-Year Projected Cost	Actual 10-Year Cost	Cost Overrun	Overrun %
2002 Farm Bill	\$451 billion	\$562 billion	\$111 billion	25%
2008 Farm Bill	\$641 billion	\$887 billion	\$246 billion	38%
2014 Farm Bill*	\$956 billion	\$1.072 trillion	\$115 billion	12%
2018 Farm Bill*	\$867 billion	\$1.285 trillion	\$418 billion	48%
2024 Farm Bill	\$1.510 billion	\$2.00+ trillion?	Likely inevitable	TK%

A more cost-effective, accountable, and transparent farm bill that is responsive to actual need can be achieved. But lawmakers must be aware that the projected cost of farm bill legislation has fallen short of reality in each of the last farm bills. Promoting better resilience, instead of dependence on federal subsidies, will require bold reforms in the next farm bill. [Common sense](#) farm subsidy reforms in particular would benefit everyone from farmers to taxpayers while also improving the climate and environment.