

Cultivating Control

Corporate Lobbying on the Food and Farm Bill

HIGHLIGHTS

Giant corporations, along with the industry associations that represent and align with them, dominate the US food and agriculture system. Together, they have hijacked federal farm policy for their profit. Analysis by the Union of Concerned Scientists shows that between 2019 and 2023, giant agribusiness companies and industry associations spent well over half a billion dollars lobbying Congress to influence legislation that includes the next food and farm bill. A pay-to-play food policy that prioritizes corporate profits is bad for the well-being of people and the environment. Lawmakers should center the needs of small and midsize farms, diverse farmers, food workers and farmworkers, consumers, and communities—not just the needs of giant corporations—when writing this legislation.

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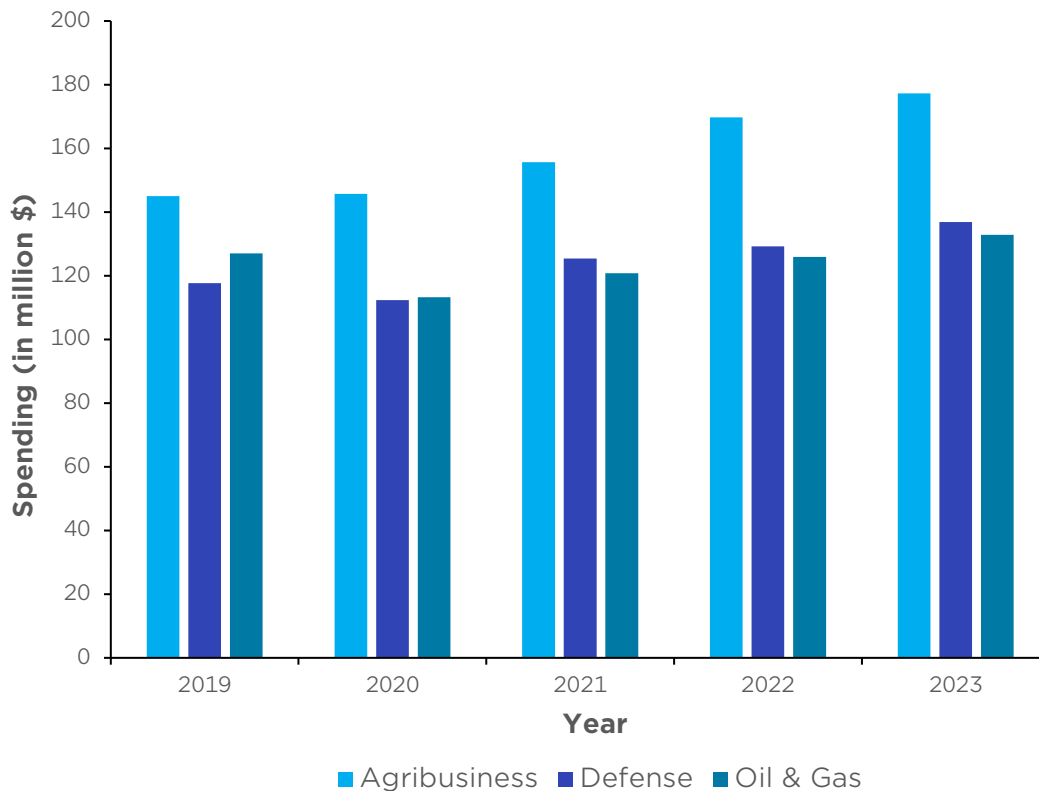
Overview

Corporate lobbying is a fact of life in the United States, with companies and special interest groups across industries spending a record-breaking \$4.2 billion in 2023 to influence federal legislation and policy (Massoglia 2024). But while lobbying by pharmaceutical companies, the oil and gas industry, and other sectors is well documented in the media, many might be surprised by the extent of lobbying done by companies and interest groups involved in food and farming.

The agribusiness sector—as defined by the nonprofit OpenSecrets, which tracks money in politics—includes a wide range of subsectors and individual companies and interest groups (OpenSecrets, n.d.a). Some of these entities are household names, including food and beverage companies, such as Nestlé and PepsiCo; meat and poultry processors, such as Tyson Foods; and giant supermarket chains, such as Albertsons. Others are lesser known, among them fertilizer and pesticide manufacturers; associations that exist to promote agricultural commodities, including corn, dairy, pork, and sugar; and organizations that represent (or claim to represent) farmers.

Like all interest groups engaged in federal lobbying, agribusiness entities that spend above a minimum threshold to influence Congress are required by law to report those expenditures quarterly. OpenSecrets has tracked these lobbying dollars across a range of industry sectors over the last 25 years, and the data they have reported show that agribusiness lobbying between 1998 and 2023 totaled \$3.25 billion (OpenSecrets, n.d.b). Moreover, lobbying by the agribusiness sector has steadily increased: In just the last five years, the agribusiness sector's annual lobbying expenditures have risen 22 percent, from \$145 million in 2019 to \$177 million in 2023. And each year, agribusiness spends more on federal lobbying than the oil and gas industry and the defense sector. (See Figure 1.).

Figure 1. Agribusiness Interests Lobby More Than Defense, Oil and Gas



Federal lobbying by corporations and other actors in the agribusiness industry exceeds that of two other industries well known for lobbying—the defense sector and the oil and gas industry—and the growth of agribusiness lobbying in recent years has outpaced that of those other industries.

SOURCE: OpenSecrets, n.d.b.

The Food and Farm Bill: A Major Focus of Agribusiness Attention

While the agribusiness sector is wide ranging, so too is the major piece of federal legislation that it seeks to influence. The food and farm bill—which industry insiders call the “farm bill,” but which actually shapes nearly everything about the food on people’s tables—is a package of some \$1 trillion in investments that Congress negotiates roughly every five years (US SCANF 2023). It funds food assistance programs to prevent hunger in low-income households, a massive insurance program to help farmers and ranchers recover from disasters, research to better understand and meet food and farming challenges, conservation programs to fight soil erosion and air and water pollution from agriculture, and more. Congress passed the last food and farm bill, officially titled the Agriculture Improvement Act, in December 2018. That legislation expired in September 2023, though Congress later extended it until September 2024.

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) analysis estimated the amount that agribusiness corporations, industry organizations, and others spent lobbying on the food and farm bill over the five-year period immediately following the enactment of the Agriculture Improvement Act. In addition, we quantified the influence that corporations and industry groups wield over this legislation through political contributions to the members of Congress primarily tasked with writing it.

Methodology

Lobbying Spending

A federal law known as the *Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 (LDA)* requires individual lobbyists and organizations that spend more than *minimum thresholds* to register as lobbyists and report their spending quarterly to Congress (Claybrook 1999; Office of the Clerk, US House of Representatives 2021). Those reports specify the dollar value of lobbying time and list issues lobbied on. Lobbyists sometimes later file amended reports, which may have higher or lower dollar values compared to the original reports.

We examined these *publicly available data*—individual quarterly lobbying disclosure reports submitted to the secretary of the US Senate, as required by the LDA—from 2019 through 2023 (US Senate, n.d.a). We used the Senate lobbying disclosure *database to search* for quarterly reports filed between January 2019 and December 2023 that list “farm bill,” using the “Specific Lobbying Issues” search (US Senate, n.d.a). Data were downloaded as PDFs, and Microsoft Excel was used to clean and aggregate data, and tabulate aggregated data. The detailed methodology is available in [Appendix A](#).

Limitations

There are a few important caveats regarding these data.

First, while the LDA requires lobbyists to list bills and issues they lobbied on as a part of each quarterly disclosure report, the law requires reporting of only an aggregate dollar value for the whole quarter’s lobbying. Because the expenditures are not itemized against the list, it is impossible for UCS or other researchers to attribute a portion of each quarter’s total to the food and farm bill or any other listed issue or bill. Further, the LDA does not require lobbyists to disclose what their “asks” are—what provisions they are lobbying to have included in (or kept out of) legislation or how they would like lawmakers to vote on a particular bill. Moreover, disclosures listed in the LDA forms are sometimes broad and do not follow the LDA guidance to list a bill or specific issue details. Hence, limiting our search to “farm bill” likely excluded some disclosures, which is a data limitation for this study.

Finally, many organizations and individuals engage in lobbying activities at low levels that do not meet the minimum thresholds specified in the LDA. These groups and lobbyists are not required to register and report and therefore are not captured in this analysis. In the interest of transparency, we note that UCS is among the organizations that lobby Congress on the food and farm bill, but at levels low enough that they do not rise to the reporting threshold.

Political Spending

Federal election law prohibits corporations from donating directly to candidates but allows corporation owners and their immediate families, corporation officers and employees, and political action committees created by corporations to make such contributions. The law requires campaigns to request and disclose the occupations and employers of individual donors if they make contributions above \$200.

We used the [OpenSecrets website](#) and search functions to examine the Federal Election Commission data that group has compiled. We estimated the dollar value of agribusiness-linked contributions to the campaigns of individuals involved with the farm bill. These individuals include the chairs and ranking members of relevant House and Senate committees. We focused on contributions made during reelection cycles corresponding to the time period studied, 2019–2023 (OpenSecrets, n.d.c).

Key Findings

Lobbying Spending

- Between 2019 and 2023, giant agribusinesses, food and agriculture industry associations, and other interest groups reported more than **\$523 million** in federal lobby expenditures on disclosure reports that listed “farm bill” among the specific lobbying issues. (See Table 1.)
- A total of **561 companies, industry associations, other special interest groups and advocacy organizations** reported lobbying on the food and farm bill during this time period. Top spenders included the US Chamber of Commerce, the American Crystal Sugar Company, the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF or Farm Bureau), and Koch Industries. (See Table 2; find the full list in [Appendix B](#).)
- Though many of these entities began reporting farm bill lobbying in the first quarter of 2019—immediately after the last such bill was enacted—the lobbying picked up considerably in 2023, when a new food and farm bill was to have been completed. Spending in **2023 accounted for more than half** of the five-year total. (See Table 3.)
- Agribusiness-linked political donors also sought to influence key food and farm bill architects through an additional **\$3.4 million in campaign contributions** during the same five-year period. Contributions went to the campaigns of Rep. Glenn “G. T.” Thompson (R-PA), chair of the House Committee on Agriculture; Rep. David Scott (D-GA), ranking member of the House Committee on Agriculture; and Sen. John Boozman (R-AR), ranking member of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. (The chair of the Senate committee, Sen. Debbie Stabenow [D-MI], is retiring in 2024 and was not up for reelection and accepting campaign contributions during the study period.)
- Tracing lobbying dollars to specific categories of industries is not easy, as there are several gray areas when it comes to defining and categorizing various types of organizations. Upon assigning entities separate categories (see Table 1), we found that

business and trade groups spend the most lobbying on issues, including the food and farm bill. But several trade groups also directly represent and overlap with the agribusiness sector. Also, several advocacy groups directly lobby on issues that uphold the interest of the agribusiness sector, implying there is no clear delineation of the influence of the industry and its players.

Table 1. Aggregated Lobbying Expenditure on Issues Including the Food and Farm Bill

Category	Amount (\$)
Business and Trade Groups	168,326,755.44
Agribusiness	118,072,476.41
Nonprofit/Advocacy	49,721,059.69
Pharmaceuticals	31,642,000.00
Manufacturing	26,710,000.00
Fuel/Energy	22,479,598.00
Education	22,401,348.38
Transport	16,172,568.00
Farm Bureau (state and federation)	15,712,927.88
Finance	14,178,925.00
Labor Union	11,387,611.82
Information Technology	10,345,000.00
State and Local Government	7,275,822.00
Indigenous Group or Tribal Nation	5,808,000.00
Hospital/Health Care	1,749,664.00
Lobbying Firm	785,400.00
Insurance	763,000.00
Total	523,532,156.62

Federal lobbying by and on behalf of corporate agribusiness actors, trade associations, advocacy organizations, and other special interest groups totaled more than half a billion dollars between 2019 and 2023.

Note: Expenditures are grouped by organization categories. The definitions of the organizational categories are available in Appendix A.

SOURCE: US Senate, n.d.b.

Table 2. Top 15 Entities Reporting Farm Bill Lobbying, 2019–2023

Entity	Total (\$)
US Chamber of Commerce	67,720,000.00
Biotechnology Innovation Organization	35,250,000.00
Bayer Corporation	23,150,000.00
Merck & Co., Inc.	19,780,000.00
American Chemistry Council	15,760,000.00
AARP	15,210,000.00
American Crystal Sugar Company	13,681,484.00
American Farm Bureau Federation*	12,461,654.00
American Bakers Association	8,538,062.00
Independent Community Bankers of America	7,783,925.00
Koch Government Affairs, LLC	7,780,000.00
American Forest and Paper Association	6,640,000.00
Feeding America	5,847,361.00
Land O'Lakes Inc.	5,324,648.00
Mars, Incorporated	5,180,000.00

The US Chamber of Commerce, which calls itself the world’s largest business association, was the biggest spender among entities that reported lobbying on the food and farm bill between 2019 and 2023. Other top spenders included the Bayer Corporation, a major pesticide manufacturer; American Crystal Sugar Company, which processes sugar beets and other agricultural products; Koch Industries, which manufactures fertilizers; and consumer food product makers Land O’Lakes and Mars, Incorporated.

** This includes just the AFBF. Together with respective state Farm Bureau chapters, the total is \$15.71 million (see Table 1).*

Note: The entire list is available in Appendix B.

SOURCE: US Senate, n.d.b.

Table 3. Lobbying Expenditure on Issues Including the Farm Bill since the 2018 Farm Bill

Year	Amount	Percentage of Total Spending
2019	61,083,095.40	11.67
2020	46,908,265.14	8.96
2021	20,383,175.00	3.89
2022	76,626,743.89	14.64
2023	318,530,877.19	60.84
Total Spending	523,532,156.62	

Annual lobbying expenditures on issues including the farm bill rose as the last bill neared its expiration, increasing exponentially to more than \$318 million in 2023.

SOURCE: US Senate, n.d.b.

What Is “Big Ag” Getting from Lobbying on the Food and Farm Bill?

As previously mentioned, it can be difficult to pin specific agribusiness lobbying to food and farm bill outcomes, and in the case of this analysis, the bill has not been passed—or drafts even introduced. Moreover, most corporations do not publish policy positions on issues that affect their businesses.

Among the top 15 entities that emerged from our analysis is Koch Industries, which reported \$7.78 million in disclosures that listed “farm bill” between 2019 and 2023. Koch is one of the largest privately held multinational corporations within the United States and has a stake in various aspects of the food and farming system, including fertilizer and agrichemical manufacturing (Forbes, n.d.). Koch also produces fuels like natural gas and has recently spent \$3.6 billion to acquire a new fertilizer production facility in Iowa (in the heart of the US commodity production zone), demonstrating that the interests of agribusiness and the oil and gas industry overlap. There is no way to know, however, specifically what Koch was lobbying for in the food and farm bill (Eller 2023).

Case Study: The AFBF

We can deduce more about another top lobbying entity, the AFBF. Along with a handful of its state-based affiliates—in Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, and Michigan—the Farm Bureau reported \$15.71 million on disclosures that listed “farm bill” between 2019 and 2023. This nonprofit association, which purports to represent farmers, has long counted millions of nonfarmer customers of its state-based insurance businesses as members (Shearn 2012). People who buy a homeowner’s or car insurance policy from an AFBF state affiliate may have no idea they are members of this large national lobbying organization (McVan 2022).

Far from representing the interests of the average farmer, the Farm Bureau aligns itself with the interests of the giant agribusiness corporations that control the food and farming system (McVan 2022). This association’s lobbying aligns with the agribusiness industry, the oil and gas sector, and other giant corporate interests. The AFBF continued to deny the science of climate change as recently as 2018 (Banerjee, Gustin, and Cushman Jr. 2018), even as climate change increasingly burdened farmers (Gustin, Banerjee, and Cushman Jr. 2018). The organization continues to fight meaningful climate action and to use its power to shape public policies within and outside the food and farm bill (Hope-D’Anieri 2021).

The AFBF published its farm bill priorities in 2023 (and again in 2024 after Congress extended the bill’s timeline), and it frequently issues press releases and issue briefs and signs public letters expressing positions. These documents provide clues to aspects of the bill this top lobbying entity has likely been pressing members of Congress about privately. The AFBF’s priority issues include pushing to maintain generous taxpayer subsidies—in the form of price and income support—for so-called Title I commodities, which include wheat, corn, soybeans, peanuts, rice, dairy, and sugar (American Farm Bureau Federation, n.d.).

The AFBF has advocated for the continuation and expansion of these subsidies—which totaled \$29 billion from 2017 to 2022—even as US farmers needed them less and less, with commodity prices rising sharply and reaching record highs between 2019 and 2022 (US Department of Agriculture 2024). Federal support for commodity crops encourages farmers to maximize production above all else, leading to multiple adverse outcomes: ever-larger agricultural operations that push out small and midsize farmers, methods that contribute substantially to water pollution and climate pollution, and overproduction and market distortion (Edwards 2023).

At the same time, the Farm Bureau works to ensure that industrial agriculture can continue to pollute with little accountability. Today, runoff from agricultural operations is the leading source of pollution of the nation’s rivers and streams, and the sector was responsible for more than 9 percent of US heat-trapping emissions in 2022—including substantial emissions of methane and nitrous oxide, both potent climate pollutants. However, the industry remains stubbornly exempt from most environmental regulation (US EPA 2023; US EPA OAR 2024a; US EPA OAR 2024b).

The AFBF works to keep it that way. It resists US Department of Agriculture (USDA) efforts to enforce minimal “conservation compliance” provisions included in the last food and farm bill. These provisions require farmers operating on highly erodible lands to take steps to conserve soil and protect water quality as a condition of receiving federal farm subsidies (Tomko 2020). In addition, the AFBF pushes to keep the largest share of taxpayer dollars flowing to some of the worst polluters: large CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations). This money comes from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, a key USDA conservation program (American Farm Bureau Federation, n.d.).

On related policies outside the realm of the food and farm bill, the Farm Bureau is also resisting environmental regulation—even when those regulations would not apply to farmers (Philpott 2017). The Farm Bureau has actively worked against water quality standards on the state and national levels (Adamy and Rudart 2024; Chesapeake Bay Foundation, n.d.).

Recently, the Farm Bureau joined the Fertilizer Institute and 12 other agricultural organizations arguing against protecting wetlands as critical waters of the United States (WOTUS) in *Sackett v. Environmental Protection Agency*. That case resulted in countless wetlands losing federal protections under the Clean Water Act (Woods 2024). To drum up support in the *Sackett* case, and for years before that, the Farm Bureau has spread disinformation to stoke fears of rampant regulations hurting family farms (Gonzalez 2023).

Most recently, the Farm Bureau used disinformation-fueled lobbying to water down new federal requirements for public corporations to disclose their climate emissions and risks. As it did around WOTUS issues, the Farm Bureau used scare tactics to rally farmers and members of Congress against the proposed rule from the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). The AFBF insisted that the rule would “severely impact” farmers and maintained that position with no evidence and even after the SEC chair clarified that farm-level reporting was not the intent (Gustin 2022; Tomko 2022; Thornton 2022; Gillison 2023). After an intensive lobbying effort that succeeded in watering down the SEC proposal, the Farm Bureau applauded the final weakened rule as a win for farmers (Hood and Ramonas 2024; Tomko 2024; Tabuchi, Livni, and Gelles 2024).

Recommendations

A pay-to-play food and farm bill that prioritizes corporate profits is bad for the health of people, the environment, and farm communities. People and organizations working to make the food and farm system fairer and more sustainable do not have the money, staffing, or influence to compete with giant corporations and industry groups, and they should not have to. The public needs to understand the extent to which deep-pocketed industry interests are shaping the food and farm policies that affect everyone.

Congress should center the needs of small and midsize farms, historically marginalized farmers, food workers and farmworkers, and consumers—not just the needs of giant corporations and industry groups—when writing the next food and farm bill. There are also other steps policymakers can take to blunt the undue power of corporate giants in the food and agriculture industries, and to provide greater public transparency into the ways deep-pocketed industry interests are shaping food and farm policies.

UCS specifically recommends that Congress and federal agencies take the following actions:

- Write a food and farm bill that serves people, not corporations. Even as the food and agriculture industries push for a food and farm bill that puts corporate profits over the well-being of people, communities, and the environment, Congress can instead create a better bill—one that reduces corporate monopolies and prioritizes small, midsize, and historically marginalized farmers, food workers and farmworkers, consumers, and communities. In particular, these pending legislative proposals should be incorporated into a new food and farm bill:
 - The Strengthening Local Processing Act (H.R. 945/S. 354), which promotes competitive agricultural markets, invests in economic development, and supports small meat and poultry processing plants (Congress, n.d.a)

- The Farm System Reform Act (H.R. 797/S. 271), which would strengthen the Packers and Stockyards Act to crack down on the monopolistic practices of meat-packers and other corporations in the meat and poultry industries, and place a moratorium on large CAFOs (Congress, n.d.b)
- The Justice for Black Farmers Act (H.R. 1167/S. 96), which directs the USDA to provide a variety of assistance to address historical discrimination and disparities in the agricultural sector to help farmers who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (Congress, n.d.c)
- The Agriculture Resilience Act (H.R. 1840/S. 1016), which would provide a suite of tools—including research, technical assistance, and financial support—to farmers (especially new and underserved farmers) to help them build more resilient farms that can withstand extreme weather and address climate change (Congress, n.d.d)
- Blunt corporate power by strengthening enforcement of antitrust laws. Reducing corporate consolidation, creating fairer markets in food and agriculture, and supporting the viability of small and midsize farms and businesses are additional steps policymakers could and should take to curb the political and economic power of the largest agribusiness actors. Federal anti-trust legislation—including the Clayton Antitrust Act, the Federal Trade Commission Act, the Packers and Stockyards Act, and the Sherman Antitrust Act—authorizes executive agencies to evaluate consolidation, scrutinize market monopolies, and enforce these laws for the public’s benefit. These agencies—including the Department of Justice, Federal Trade Commission, and USDA—should step up their enforcement against corporations that exert too much power over the food system.
- Increase transparency around corporate influence in policymaking. Although it is helpful for the public to know which groups are lobbying on legislation such as the food and farm bill and how much they are spending to shape that legislation, there is still too much the public does not know about how corporate interests shape public policy. Two policy approaches would help increase transparency:
 - Corporate reform advocates and members of Congress have asked the SEC to craft new rules requiring publicly traded companies to disclose further information on their lobbying activities (Public Citizen 2024; Warren et al. 2023). Such rules would provide investors and the public with more detailed information about what big corporations are seeking in federal and state legislation and rulemaking.
 - Corporations disproportionately dominate the public comment process during new rulemakings, often using flawed studies and reports from authors who have conflicts of interest. The Stop Corporate Capture Act would curb the undue power of corporations while prioritizing the public’s interests and better enabling public participation in agency rulemaking (Congress, n.d.e). It would require disclosure of funding sources for studies and reports submitted in public comments and impose civil penalties on deliberate use of false information to influence regulators.

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