

For the Farmers

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Two upcoming actions at the Capitol highlight the growing concern over farm issues in New York state and in the nation.

Wednesday (Feb. 8) will be a statewide day of action organized by Food & Water Watch. The goal is to show Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand that New Yorkers support a Fair Farm Bill. The Farm Bill is national legislation that gets reauthorized every five years, and is due for reauthorization this year.

The following Wednesday (Feb. 15), American Farmland Trust of New York has organized a No Farms, No Food rally to urge state legislators to support a number of measures that back farms, farmers and local food production.

Volunteers for Food & Water Watch worked across the country on Jan. 25, getting people to call members of the U.S. Senate Agricultural Committee, including Sen. Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), about the upcoming Farm Bill. Locally, the group reports a strong turnout for a kickoff event in Albany Feb. 1. Wednesday's efforts will include public events across the state, and a rally at the Capitol.

"Our food system is broken, and we need to fix it," reads literature from the Fair Farm Bill campaign. "Thousands of family farmers are pushed out of business while huge corporations like Monsanto are making record profits, and consumers also pay the price."

Consumers pay the price of consolidated markets in terms of what kind of food we can buy. The problems run the gamut from an overabundance of processed foods to a lack of availability of fresh, local produce in food deserts.

“The senators on the Agriculture Committee, of which Sen. Gillibrand is one, are going to be deciding what goes into this bill,” said Mara Schechter from Food & Water Watch. “Typically this bill includes policies stacked against small and mid-sized farmers. We’re looking to fix that.”

The fix involves leveling the playing field for smaller-than-agribusiness farmers by enforcing antitrust laws, reviewing mergers of big agribusinesses, and setting fair prices for small farmers. The Fair Farm Bill seeks to prevent market manipulation by big agribusinesses. An area where this really affects New York is dairy.

“One corporation, Dean Foods, controls 40 percent of the market for dairy, which creates monopoly control,” said Schechter, referring to the national dairy industry, not just the state’s. “They have no incentive to provide good food, or provide fair prices for small farmers.”

Schechter said that next Wednesday should show Sen. Gillibrand that a lot of her constituents are paying attention and hoping that she can be a real leader for farmers. This hope is certainly within the realm of the possible; Gillibrand has kept her ear on farmers, holding listening sessions to understand their concerns. Last year she stood by GIPSA (Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyard Administration) rules—part of small farm protections in the 2008 Farm Bill—when they came under attack by agribusiness lobbying.

The No Farms, No Food Rally on Feb. 15 will be a time for people to meet with their legislators in efforts to strengthen New York’s farm and food economy. People will be seeking support for farmland-protection programs; restoration of funds for the New York Farm Viability Institute to assist farmers with marketing, business development and research; increased funding for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program in the 2012-2013 budget; and funding for incentives to increase use of SNAP (food stamp benefits) at farmers markets.

State and regional food production will be encouraged with a number of bills. One allows farmers to brew and bottle products, and requires farm brewers to use New York state hops. Another piece of legislation would have the Empire State Development Corporation encourage development and rehabilitation of wholesale regional farmers markets. The Buy From the Backyard Act requires the Office of General Services and other state agencies to buy 20 percent of their food from New York state food producers and/or processors.