A Lot Of Things Have To Change: Undoing the Big Ag-Big Food Stranglehold

The Modern Pentagram Douglas McKee © 2026

It’s plain to see this is a big mess. It can’t all be changed at once because the current system isn't held up by subsidies alone — it's a whole interlocking set of demand guarantees, insurance, infrastructure, and cost structures. Here's what would actually have to move:

Shrink the guaranteed demand for feed and fuel

- **Reform the Renewable Fuel Standard.** Ethanol and biodiesel mandates are the demand engine behind ~45% of corn and over half of soybean oil; easing mandates would directly cut the profitability edge of those crops. Modeling suggests the effect is real but gradual — eliminating the mandate outright was estimated to trim ethanol production only a few percent in the short run — so this is a decade-scale shift, not a light switch.[publicinterestnetwork][card.iastate][www-tx.ers.usda]

Fix the rules that actively discourage food crops

- **Remove the planting restrictions.** Farmers in commodity programs lose payments (plus pay a penalty) on base acres planted to fruits or vegetables — a rule originally pushed by produce growers themselves to avoid subsidized competition. Ending that would remove an explicit federal barrier, though USDA's own analysis says the impact would be modest because other constraints dominate.[nationalaglawcenter][congress][ers.usda]
- **Extend the insurance safety net.** Corn and soy growers get heavily subsidized insurance with guaranteed revenue; over 40% of fruit, nut, and vegetable acreage has no federal insurance coverage at all, and fewer than 9% of specialty-crop farms bought insurance in the year studied. Equalizing risk protection — better whole-farm revenue insurance, coverage for diversified operations — is probably the single biggest supply-side lever.[fultonsun][fb]
- **Cap or redirect commodity payments** toward diversified operations and beginning producers, so the guaranteed-payment floor stops tilting the field.[americarenewing]

Build what the food system lacks

This is the hardest part. USDA's research on the barriers lists: specialized equipment and irrigation, hard-to-get harvest labor, multi-year lag for orchards and vines, and the

need to line up contracts and markets before planting. The Midwest is "locked into" corn/soy because elevators, combines, and buyers all exist for those and nothing else. So a real shift needs cold storage, processing capacity, and market channels for produce — plus labor policy that makes hand-harvested crops viable.[ers.usda][iowastatedaily]

Grow the demand side

None of that matters if people don't buy more produce. Policies like SNAP produce incentives and institutional procurement (schools, hospitals) raise demand for exactly the crops farmers would need to switch into. Cheap corn calories didn't just appear — they were built into the food supply — and reversing that works the same way.[publicinterestnetwork]

The honest caveat

Farmers grow corn and soy not only because of subsidies but because they're the most mechanized, lowest-labor, most reliable crops per acre. USDA's modeling of removing planting restrictions found it would change little on its own, and Berkeley's review of the literature reached the same conclusion. So the realistic version is: gradually reduce the mandates and payment guarantees while extending insurance and transition support to food crops, invest in labor and infrastructure, and let relative profitability shift over a decade or two — with demand for produce doing the pulling.[gspp.berkeley][ers.usda]