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Sugar grower aid hits sour note

When they think about the farm bill at all, most New Englanders probably think of the New England dairy compact, a six-state milk producers' cartel that is set to expire at the end of September (to the benefit of consumers). But the bill is full of many more wasteful, inefficient subsidies.

One of the worst is sugar. Limits on imports and price supports for domestic growers keep U.S. cane sugar prices at about twice the world price. These provisions have cost consumers $9.5 billion since 1996, according to the General Accounting Office, even as the government has begun accumulating a stockpile of surplus cane sugar (it acquired 1 million tons last year, which costs $1.4 million a month to store).

This has bad side effects. Sugar production is one of the chief causes of the degradation of the Everglades in Florida, on which the state and federal governments are now planning to spend billions of dollars for restoration. Candy companies threaten to move manufacturing offshore, with its attendant jobs, to get access to cheaper raw material. Suppliers of substitute sweeteners get an indirect subsidy from prices higher than they would otherwise be. One percent of the growers get 40 percent of the subsidies.

When Congress returns to work after the holiday, Reps. George Miller (D-Calif.) and Dan Miller (R-Fla.) plan to offer on the floor of the House an amendment (which will be called, naturally, the Miller-Miller Amendment) to strike out some of the most harmful sugar provisions. It would drop the production quota authority to be granted by the government by the Agriculture Committee bill, and reduce the price supports that have created the recent surplus.

It would be better to kill this outrageous giveaway program. But the Miller-Miller Amendment may be the only reform effort on the table. It deserves the support of all New England representatives.