

A good lesson in special interest politics

The Farmers and Consumers Market Bulletin is a weekly tabloid published by the Georgia Department of Agriculture. Its purpose is to help farmers sell various goods by offering them free classified ads. Products sold through the **Bulletin** range from the commonplace—farm equipment and livestock—to such exotica as fresh rattlesnake meat and homemade lye soap.

Features like a recipe section, readers' letters, and brief agricultural articles add a folksy, homespun atmosphere, and help endear it to subscribers.

The tabloid goes out to around 250,000 subscribers each and every week—for free. Taxpayers pick up the tab: over \$1,134,000.00 in 1985.

Now I have nothing against the **Bulletin** itself. In fact, I find it rather charming.

But **The Farmers and Consumers Market Bulletin** is a textbook example of the kind of



senseless, unnecessary government programs that abound in Georgia. Look at it closely and you can see how special interest politics operates, and how greed, ignorance and political cowardice work together to strip taxpayers, in small but painful bites, of their hard-earned dollars.

In essence, the **Bulletin** is simply a government hand-out. Like most government hand-outs, it is not aimed at helping the poor or distressed. Rather, it takes money from middle and lower-income taxpayers and doles it out to an economic special interest group—farmers, in this case.

There is no rational justification for this program. Why, after all, should the state government be in the business of providing free classified ads for farmers? Why on earth should other professionals—hairdressers, booksellers, mechanics, and so on—be forced to pay for free advertising for farmers?

Clearly this is absurd and unjust.

Furthermore, the **Bulletin** is obviously a service that, if genuinely needed, could be done equally well—and probably much

better—by the private sector.

Plainly, then, there is no reason for the government to offer this program. So why does it continue year after year?

Others have asked the same question. Former governors Jimmy Carter and George Busbee—hardly wild-eyed budget slashers—both tried to make the **Bulletin** carry at least a little of its own weight. Carter attempted to cut publishing frequency, while Busbee suggested a modest \$1.00 per year subscription fee.

Yet even these mild, cost-trimming proposals were met with cries of outrage by the **Bulletin's** readers, and were quickly abandoned. Although **Bulletin** readers are frequently described as "avid" and "loyal" and so on, many were furious at the suggestion they pay even two cents per week for the paper and free advertising privileges.

The **Bulletin** continues, not because of need but because of politics. Its existence illustrates a fundamental lesson in the way special interest politics works.

The **Bulletin** costs the average taxpayer only a small amount per year. Thus, it is not cost-efficient

for him or her to lobby against it. Even the cost of a protest letter—which would accomplish nothing—almost outweighs the program's cost to the individual taxpayer.

For the beneficiaries of the program, however—**Bulletin** subscribers and advertisers—it is well worth their time to write angry letters, threaten to switch votes, and to use other pressure tactics to lobby for continuance of their subsidy. Politicians concerned with votes rather than sound policy—and that covers about 99.999 percent of the breed—are notoriously responsive to such demands.

And so the hand-out goes on and on.

By itself, the **Bulletin** is obviously not a terrible drain on Georgia taxpayers. But the **Bulletin** is not by itself. That's the point.

Multiply it by thousands of programs—each of which benefits some undeserving but vocal minority—and you begin to see why government at all levels—local, state, and national—is riddled with

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senseless and costly boondoggles like this one.

Until Georgians understand this, and start loudly demanding program cuts across the board, talk of meaningful tax reduction and smaller government is just so much empty jaw-flapping.