ALTUS, Oklahoma  Here's a gift Americans should give themselves this Christmas season: a firm commitment to cut farm subsidies sharply, above all for cotton.

Sure, American subsidies hurt poor African countries. But the biggest problem with farm subsidies is that they are a cancer on rural America itself. They raise land prices significantly, which makes it hard for young farmers to get started, and they arguably undermine the family farm by creating incentives for the consolidation of agriculture.

That's why those who raise livestock - who generally don't enjoy subsidies - often speak derisively of those who "farm the government." Despite the stereotype that all rural America is on the socialist teat, it's largely the farmers of specific commodities like cotton, rice and corn who had the political pull to push a subsidy through Congress.

I came here to cotton country to talk to farmers, because I thought I owed them that much. And I sympathize with them. They are good, hard-working people who are struggling - and who are terrified of losing the price supports that sustain their entire way of life.

Danny Robbins, a fourth-generation cotton farmer here, has already told his 14-year-old son not to take over the family farm as a full-time job.

"I will encourage him to have something to fall on beside his backside," Robbins said. "We're a stroke of a pen from going out of business. It's pretty scary."

But subsidies are the problem, not the solution. They have kept marginal land in production, resulting in overproduction and lower prices - and here in Oklahoma, subsidies kept people farming cotton when the market tried to switch them to canola, peanuts, wheat or other crops.

Consider corn. From 2000 through 2004, the average American farmer has, at first glance, lost money every year planting corn - up to $128 per acre in losses, depending on the year. Yet the acreage planted in corn has been increasing. Why? Partly because U.S. taxpayers more than covered the losses with $25 billion in subsidies in that period. Without the subsidies, according to a study cited by Oxfam, U.S. corn production would have been 15 percent lower and world corn prices 7 percent higher.

I grew up on a farm in Oregon, and my teen years centered on the Future Farmers of America. But this column isn't a betrayal - because subsidies don't strengthen rural America, but sap it.

The cotton farmers here in Oklahoma raise some valid arguments - above all, the need to aid struggling communities. But handing out cash to full-time cotton farmers whose average net worth is around $1 million doesn't help the most desperate agricultural families. And I get a farm subsidy of $588 each year, because I own farmland in Oregon that is in the conservation reserve program; surely there are better ways to help struggling farm towns than by sending subsidies to New York journalists.

I raised sheep in FFA, and my parents still keep a few ewes. And almost no industry has
suffered more than sheep ranching, with the numbers of sheep in the United States falling from 56 million head in 1942 to just 6 million today. But imagine if we had started a major sheep subsidy to ease the trauma. Today we might have 100 million sheep, a $10 billion annual subsidy, and ranchers would still be struggling.

At this month's World Trade Organization meeting in Hong Kong, the arguments against subsidies focused on the harm they do to poor countries. Europe is the worst offender, subsidizing each cow to the tune of $2.20 a day - more than much of the world lives on. I agree that one of the most effective ways to help poor countries would be to cut our subsidies.

But the biggest reason to reform American agriculture is at home. My heart goes out to the struggling cotton farmers here in Oklahoma. But the existing system has failed, and it's time to rely on the market.