Sugar policy keeps price (and grower profits) down

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Back in 1990, the average new car cost $15,000. You could fill it up for $1.16 a gallon and still have plenty left over to buy a snack for the ride home.

A new car will now set you back $23,000, and you have to spend so much on gas that even a candy bar seems like a stretch.

But at least the sugar in that snack is still cheap. Though other commodity prices have peaked, candy companies are paying just 28 cents for a pound of sugar, compared with 30 cents in 1990 and 38 cents in 1980.

U.S. sugar policy is the main reason that prices have remained so affordable. More amazing, this policy costs taxpayers very little because, unlike those who participate in many other farm programs, sugar producers don't receive crop subsidy checks.

Critics of the policy claim that sugar costs less on the "world market." They fail to mention that there is no true "world market" for sugar - 80"percent of the world's sugar is never traded on an open market - and the price they are quoting is for unrefined sugar and excludes transportation costs. It's like comparing the price of an orange in Brazil to the price of orange juice in a West Palm Beach grocery store.

Why, then, are chocolates, cookies and cakes so much more expensive? That's a great question for the large food conglomerates that seem to post huge profits year in and year out.

Unfortunately for Florida's sugar producers, those kinds of profits have not reached the farm. But the new farm bill passed by Congress should help ease some of the pressure. It will lessen the impact of unneeded foreign sugar on the U.S. market by turning surplus imports into biofuels, which should help the price at the pump. And sugar producers will receive better rates on government loans, to offset the skyrocketing costs of fuel and fertilizer.

Florida's elected officials deserve credit for their support of the bill. While we may have to depend on foreign countries for fuel, we won't have to depend on foreign countries for food.