sugar lobbies, made up of individuals or firms employed by the sugarcane and sugar-beet industries, act on behalf of these industries to influence government policies and actions that might affect sugar production, transport, labor, or sales and, therefore, profits. The U.S. government generally requires most lobbyists to register, to disclose who pays them and how much, and to list the matters they discuss with officials. The history of sugar lobbying in the United States can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, when Congress first imposed a tariff on imported sugar to generate revenue. Because tariffs are also protectionist, domestic sugar producers lobbied to maintain them and have done so consistently ever since. In the 1930s they also lobbied successfully for acreage allotments and support prices. That such policies remain in place today despite the higher cost of sugar to consumers can be attributed to the steadfast work and consequent political power of sugar-industry lobbying groups, and the obscurity and complexity of agriculture policy to the average American.

In 2013, 44 companies, trade associations, and organizations specifically mentioned the word "sugar" in their lobbying disclosure forms. These included sugar producers and processors such as the American Crystal Sugar Company and the Fanjul Corporation, and their trade associations, such as the American Sugar Cane League. Collectively, these politically powerful groups are known as Big Sugar. Others lobbying on sugar issues are international companies and associations that sell, transport, or trade sugar itself or foods and beverages that contain it. Public-interest groups concerned about the health effects of excessive sugar consumption also lobby on sugar issues. See SUGAR AND HEALTH. These groups, however, are not equally influential. As commonly used, the term "sugar lobby" refers to Big Sugar.

Although lobbyists do not have to disclose their opinions on issues, it is easy to make educated guesses about what sugar lobbyists want from government officials, based on the primary elements of current sugar policies: price supports, marketing allotments, and tariff-rate quotas. These decades-old and seemingly immutable policies maintain the price of domestic sugar at levels higher than those on the world market. Big Sugar wants to keep protectionist policies in place and so far has succeeded in doing so.

Big Sugar gets its way through another mechanism: campaign contributions through political action committees (PACs). To cite just one example, the Florida Sugar Cane League's PAC disclosed $155,000 in campaign contributions during the 2011–2012 election cycle. According to OpenSecrets.org, a site that tracks such expenditures, these funds supported politicians in Florida and 38 other states, with 44 percent of the contributions going to Democrats, 54 percent to Republicans, and 1 percent to an Independent. This PAC contributed to the campaigns of every congressional leader of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees. Other Big Sugar PACs followed similar contribution patterns.

The opponents of current U.S. sugar policies, whose efforts have proved unsuccessful to date, include companies such as Hershey's and Kraft Foods that buy large amounts of sugar to use in their products and wish it were cheaper; food trade associations, such as the American Beverage Association; and business groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce that favor a free market in agriculture.

The strongest public argument for reform of current policies is the higher cost of sugar to consumers. In 2000 the Government Accountability Office estimated that elimination of sugar quotas and tariffs would save $1.9 billion annually. Passed along to consumers, this savings would come to only $6 per American, an amount too small to generate much outrage by elected officials or by the public.

Interest in sugar policy also comes from public-health groups such as the American Dental Association, the American Diabetes Association, and the Center for Science in the Public Interest. During negotiations over the 2014 farm bill, these groups lobbied for a government-funded study of the health consequences of sugar-sweetened beverages, but failed to get it. See SODA.

Because lobbying takes place in secret, it is difficult to know precisely how Big Sugar exerts its influence, but occasional examples surface. In 1998 the Starr Report revealed that sugar producers have unusual access to the highest levels of government. When President Bill Clinton entertained Monica Lewinsky on a national holiday, he interrupted their tryst by accepting a telephone call from Florida sugar tycoon Alfonso Fanjul. Fanjul was objecting to a proposed tax on Florida sugar growers for cleaning up the pollution his company's sugar production was causing to the Everglades. The tax was not enacted.

Another example occurred in 2003, when the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended that added sugars comprise no more than 10 percent of daily calories. Sugar lobbies induced two senators to demand that the United States withdraw funding from the WHO if it did not rescind the proposal. International sugar lobbies visited the governments of sugar-growing nations, warning them of the dire consequences of such advice. The WHO withdrew the proposal.

Early in 2014 the WHO reintroduced the 10 percent recommendation and suggested that consuming added sugars at 5 percent of calories would be even better for public health. Sugar lobbies expressed immediate displeasure, but times had changed and the recommendation held.

Nevertheless, Big Sugar has a long history of getting what it wants. Its work has ensured that no reform of sugar policy is imminent. The 2014 farm bill left the U.S. sugar program virtually unchanged, and sugar policies will not be reconsidered for another five years. But it is safe to assume that lobbyists on all sides of sugar policy issues are already working to influence the outcome of the next farm bill.

See also SUGAR BARONS and SUGAR REFINERIES.

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