Half of federal farm subsidies go to 22 of 435 congressional districts

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WASHINGTON - Half of government farm payments over the past decade have gone to just 22 of the 435 congressional districts, according to an analysis by the Environmental Working Group.

The group wants the federal government to cut payments to large farm operations and revise provisions that allow some to collect millions of dollars a year in subsidies. The Senate could vote on the issue this week.

"The whole system is tilted to a handful of big farm operations, and everybody else comes up short," said Ken Cook, the group's president. "We were surprised at the degree to which payments are concentrated in those several dozen congressional districts.

"Once members of Congress see just how much they would stand to gain by a fairer distribution, I think that will help shift the debate," Cook said.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, said Tuesday he will try to add payment limits to the budget-cutting bill being debated this week in the Senate. He proposes lowering the maximum subsidies any farmer can collect each year from $360,000 to $125,000, with farm couples allowed to receive $250,000. He would also revise provisions that allow many growers to evade the limits.

Grassley would use the $1 billion in savings to bolster conservation and spare farmers from across-the-board payment reductions. The budget bill in the Senate would cut more than $3 billion from food and farm programs, mostly from conservation and farm payments.

Farm payments are heavily concentrated in the Midwest, the group found. Farmers in 22 congressional districts collected more than half of all subsidies, about $69 billion, in the past decade, EWG said.

The group maintains a database of annual payments, based on Agriculture Department data, and released its 2005 analysis Tuesday. The Agriculture Department made farm subsidy payments over the last 10 years to farmers in 408 of the nation’s 435 congressional districts. Over the decade, 349 districts got at least $1 million.

The list of the most subsidized districts reads like a Who's Who on the agriculture committees in
Congress. They include those of lawmakers from North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana and parts of Kansas, Nebraska, Arkansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Texas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Illinois, Colorado, California, Georgia and Louisiana. Some of the top farm-producing states aren't on the list; for example, Florida. And all but one of California's 23 districts are omitted.