



Department of Social Development and World Peace
Office of Domestic Social Development

Background on the 2007 Farm Bill
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ISSUE

For people of faith, food production is unlike any other sector of the economy precisely because it is necessary for life itself. This is the particular lens which shapes our engagement on the Farm Bill, which comes up for renewal every five or six years and sets U.S. policy in a number of key areas:

- Programs in support of certain farm commodity crops
- Food Stamps and emergency food assistance programs
- Conservation programs that promote responsible stewardship of the land
- Investment to promote and stimulate rural development
- Food aid for hungry communities overseas in response to disasters or other causes of food insecurity

Over the next few months, there will be renewed discussion about how U.S. farm policies affect domestic farmers, food producers, and food consumers. The current programs often mismatch needs and resources, leaving out those who need it the most. The changes taking place in U.S. farm communities require that a new Farm Bill support more effectively and fairly those who make our food; build rural communities; and ensure that no one goes hungry.

The new Congress is also facing other challenges due to the changing nature of U.S. agriculture in a global economy, the need for sources of energy that are agriculture-based to address U.S. dependency on oil and the opportunity to promote rural development. Global trade talks around agriculture also seek compliance of U.S. farm programs with international trade rules. As the U.S. seeks to gain access to overseas markets, developing countries are asking the U.S. to cut its agricultural subsidies that, many argue, promote overproduction and harm poor-country farmers.

Half the world's population relies on agriculture to make a living. Most poor or extremely poor people around the globe (i.e. those living on less than \$2 or \$1 per day) live in rural areas, so agriculture is a primary means for alleviating poverty.

Congress must reauthorize the Farm Bill this year. Senate and House Agriculture Committees have signaled they would like to have a bill introduced by the end of August. As Committee hearings on the shape of the next Farm Bill intensify, it will be important for those concerned with poverty to engage in this debate.

BACKGROUND

Federal farm programs began during the Great Depression, when one-quarter of the U.S. population lived on farms. For generations, the federal government has guaranteed minimum prices to farmers and allowed farmers to sell some crops to the federal government when markets were poor. Loan deficiency payments or subsidies for certain commodity crops like corn, wheat, cotton and soybeans are the most common guarantees.

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The reauthorization of the Farm Bill provides an opportunity to reshape the current, broken agricultural policies to build a more just framework that better serves small and moderate-size family farms in the U.S., promotes good stewardship of the land, overcomes hunger here and abroad, and helps vulnerable farmers and their families in developing countries. It also provides an opportunity to strengthen and improve the Food Stamp program, a key part of the fight against hunger in the US, and to strengthen international food aid programs for starving people overseas.

We are working with Catholic partners (National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services) and others, including a religious working group on the Farm Bill, to urge Congress to adopt policies that support domestic farmers, promote rural development, and reduce hunger and poverty in the United States and around the world.

USCCB POSITION

The primary goals of agricultural policies should be providing food for all people and providing a decent life for farmers and farmworkers in this country and abroad. A key measure of every agricultural program and legislative initiative is whether it helps the most vulnerable farmers, farmworkers, and their families and whether it contributes to a global food system that provides basic nutrition for all. USCCB support policies and programs that encourage rural development, promoting and maintaining the culture and values of rural communities.

Limited government resources for subsidies and other forms of support should be targeted to small and moderate-sized farms, especially minority-owned farms, to help them through difficult times caused by changes in global agricultural markets or weather patterns that destroy crops. Agricultural subsidies often go to a few large producers, while smaller family farms struggle to survive. Rather than simply rewarding production, which can lead to surpluses and falling prices, government resources should reward environmentally sound and sustainable farming practices.

(For I was Hungry And You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Even though there is not yet a specific bill, contact your Senators and Representatives on the Agriculture Committees and urge them to give priority to the following policies in the 2007 Farm Bill:

- Increase investments that combat rural poverty and strengthen rural communities
- Strengthen and expand programs that reduce hunger and improve nutrition in the United States
- Strengthen and increase investment in policies that promote conservation and good stewardship of the land
- Provide transitions for farmers to alternative forms of support that are more equitable and do not distort trade in ways that fuel hunger and poverty
- Protect the health and safety of farmworkers
- Expand research related to alternative and renewable forms of energy
- Provide direct food aid efficiently and effectively to hungry people in other nations.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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