



Hill Notes

February 2007



2007 Farm Bill

The primary goals of agricultural policies should be providing food for all people and reducing poverty among 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.

For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [2003]

In 2007 Congress must reauthorize an omnibus piece of legislation known as the Farm Bill, which sets U.S. policy in key areas that affect domestic farmers and food producers, domestic food consumers, and farmers in developing countries.

Reauthorization of the Farm Bill presents an opportunity to reshape our broken agricultural policies to build a more just framework that better serves rural communities and 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:

Strengthening and Sustaining Rural Communities:

We must invest in rural development programs, promoting and maintaining the culture and values of rural communities. Congress should consider a wide range of rural economic development strategies, including: assistance to help new farmers and ranchers; investment in education, training and telecommunications access; and fostering entrepreneurship. As Congress considers expanding renewable energy programs, priorities should include making sure rural communities share the benefit and preserving the local environment.

Improving the Food Stamp Program:

The Food Stamp program is our nation's first line of defense against hunger, helping over 26 million low-income people put food on the table. The bishops have long supported strengthening the domestic food assistance programs to ensure that no one in America goes hungry or suffers malnutrition. Among the priorities for Farm Bill reauthorization are ending the five-year waiting period for adult legal immigrants before they can receive Food Stamps, increasing benefit levels to reflect higher food costs (average Food Stamp benefit level is \$1 per person per meal), and improving outreach and enrollment so the millions of eligible families not yet enrolled can get help.

Fostering Stewardship of the Land:

Protecting God's creation must be a central goal of agricultural policies. Congress should seek to promote soil conservation, improve water quality, protect wildlife, and maintain biodiversity. Government resources should be targeted to farmers and ranchers that use environmentally sound agricultural practices. We should strengthen and

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improve programs that provide financial and technical assistance to promote conservation and environmentally sound practices, and that retire environmentally sensitive lands. These include Conservation Security Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Reserve Program.

Re-evaluating Agriculture Support Programs:

Last year approximately \$22 billion was spent on agriculture subsidies, which apply to only a limited number of crops leaving many farmers with no assistance. Agricultural subsidies often go to a few large producers, while smaller family farms struggle to survive. Limited government resources should be targeted to small and moderate-sized farms, especially minority-owned farms and farmers of limited means, to help them through difficult times caused by changes in global agricultural markets or weather patterns that destroy crops. Rather than simply rewarding production, which can lead to surpluses and falling prices, government resources should reward environmentally sound and sustainable farming practices. Subsidy programs can also have distorting effects on international commodities markets that violate our international trade obligations and make it harder for farmers in developing nations make living. The President's recent proposal takes some steps in these directions.

Safe Living and Working Conditions for Farmworkers:

Agricultural labor involves some of the most dangerous jobs in the United States, with workers exposed to harsh working conditions, pesticides and other chemicals, and long hours of labor-intensive work. Congress should strengthen pesticide protection, training and reporting programs, as well as programs providing adequate housing and training for seasonal farmworkers.

Fighting Hunger Overseas:

Approximately 850 million people worldwide are considered food insecure, meaning they do not have access to sufficient food to meet their needs for a healthy life. The Farm Bill should continue to provide for the use of U.S. commodities to help combat food insecurity around the world. In addition, such commodities can provide an important source of long-term development programming in such areas as stimulating local agriculture expansion, supporting school feeding programs, as well as an important source of support for those impacted by HIV/AIDS and other vulnerable populations.

The U.S. bishops, with partners National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Catholic Charities USA, and Catholic Relief Services, will work towards policy priorities for the 2007 Farm Bill including:

- Increasing investments that combat rural poverty and strengthen rural communities
- Strengthening and expanding programs that reduce hunger and improve nutrition in the United States
- Strengthening and increasing investment in policies that promote conservation and good stewardship of the land
- Providing transitions for farmers to alternative forms of support that are more equitable and do not distort trade in ways that fuel hunger and poverty
- Protecting the health and safety of farmworkers
- Expanding research related to alternative and renewable forms of energy
- Providing direct food aid efficiently and effectively to hungry people in other nations

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