



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of Domestic Social Development

### **FARM BILL** **February 2009**

#### **ISSUE**

For people of faith, food production is unlike any other part of the economy precisely because it is necessary for life itself. This is the particular lens that 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
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps) and emergency food assistance programs
- Conservation programs promoting responsible stewardship of the land
- Investment to promote and stimulate rural development
- Food aid for hungry communities abroad in response to disasters or other causes of food insecurity.

The 110<sup>th</sup> Congress passed *The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008* (Farm bill) on June 18, 2008, and it was enacted into law overriding a presidential veto (P.L. 110-246). This new law remains in effect through September 2012. While significant improvements were made in domestic and international food assistance programs, conservation and rural development, the legislation fell short in ensuring that agricultural supports (subsidies) are targeted more effectively and fairly to those who need help the most and who are actively engaged in farming. For a more detailed description of how the Catholic community's priorities fared, read our June 3, 2008, joint update, available at [usccb.org/sdwp/national/2008farmbill60308.pdf](http://usccb.org/sdwp/national/2008farmbill60308.pdf).

#### **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, rice, cotton and soybeans are the most common guarantees. This structure leaves out or leaves behind many small farmers and ranchers.

The 2008 Farm bill was a missed opportunity (that will need to be taken up again) 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. Reauthorization also provides an opportunity to strengthen and improve the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-SNAP (formerly known as the Food Stamps Program), a key part of the fight against hunger in the United States, and to strengthen international food security aid programs for starving people abroad.

During the 2008 Farm bill discussion, the Catholic community offered a united, constructive, and active voice in the debate about how U.S. farm policies affect domestic farmers, food producers, and food consumers. A remarkable Catholic partnership (USCCB, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Catholic Charities USA, and Catholic Relief Services) and others, including a religious working group on the Farm bill, urged Congress to adopt policies that support domestic farmers, promote rural development, and reduce hunger and poverty in the United States and around the world. 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 reform is a primary means for alleviating poverty.

Congress is 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 United States seeks to gain access to overseas markets, developing countries are asking the United States to cut its agricultural subsidies that, many argue, promote overproduction, distort fair prices and harm poor-country farmers.

## **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 continues to support policies and programs that encourage rural development, promote and maintain 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.)

## **ACTION**

Remain engaged in the food production public debate, and urge your Senators and Representative to

- Ensure that agriculture supports are targeted to owners of small and medium-sized farm and ranch operations by urging the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to enforce and strengthen payment limitation provisions
- Support initiatives that reward farmers and ranchers who practice responsible stewardship of their land and common waterways
- Monitor USDA's implementation of provisions aimed at assisting beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers
- Continue to review farm subsidies program to eliminate practices that do not comply with international trade obligations and that disadvantage poor farmers in other countries
- Review the economics and the ethics of subsidies for food for fuel in a way that places priority on the rights of the poor in the United States and in the developing world to adequate access to nutritious food, and the promotion of sustainable agriculture practices that protect farmland, natural resources and wildlife for future generations
- Increase support to developing countries to assist them to increase their investments in agricultural research, extension, rural infrastructure and market access for poor small farmers.

## **For more information, contact**

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