



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

FARM BILL **February 2012**

ISSUE

For people of faith, food production is unlike any other part of the economy precisely because it is necessary for life itself. As Pope Benedict XVI has stated, the “liberation from the yoke of hunger is the first concrete expression of the right to life...” This is the particular lens that shapes the Catholic community’s engagement on the Farm bill, which comes up for renewal every five or six years and sets U.S. agriculture policy in a number of key areas:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Food Stamps) and emergency food assistance programs;
- Food aid for hungry communities abroad in response to famine and disasters or other causes of food insecurity, and to support development;
- Conservation programs promoting responsible stewardship of the land;
- Targeting and redirecting significant agriculture subsidies from affluent producers to poor farmers and hungry people;
- Investment in programs that promote rural development and the well-being of farmers and their communities

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 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 (crop and farm subsidies) were targeted more effectively and fairly to those who need help the most and who are actively engaged in farming.

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. The current structure, however, excludes or leaves behind many small farmers and ranchers who must compete with larger producers and wealthier farmers.

The 2012 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 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 2012 Farm bill discussion, the Catholic community will offer a united, constructive, and active voice in the debate about how U.S. farm policies affect hungry people, domestic farmers, food producers and consumers, and promote conservation of creation. A remarkable Catholic partnership (USCCB, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Catholic Charities USA, and Catholic Relief Services) will 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. 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 pressures of a troubling economy, the need for sources of energy that reduce 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, promote overproduction, distort fair prices and harm poor farmers in struggling nations.

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 continues to support policies and programs that encourage rural development, promote and maintain the culture and values of rural communities and promote conservation and stewardship of creation.

Limited government resources for subsidies and other forms of support should be reduced and 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:

- Support the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Food Stamps) and emergency food assistance programs;
- Support food aid for hungry communities abroad in response to famine and disasters or other causes of food insecurity, and to support development;
- 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;
- 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 and conservation programs 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

For more information, contact:

Anthony J. Granado, USCCB, 202-541-3189, agranado@usccb.org; Steve Hilbert, USCCB, 202-541-3149, shilbert@usccb.org; Lucreda Cobbs, Catholic Charities USA, 703-236-6243, lcobbs@CatholicCharitiesUSA.org; or Robert T. Gronski, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, 515-270-2634, bob@ncrlc.com