



CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE

June 28, 2018

United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Rural Life, and the National Council of the U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul take this opportunity to respond to the “Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018” (S. 3042).

**Domestic Hunger and Nutrition:** Millions of struggling families continue to face the perils of food insecurity on a daily basis. Food production and the ability to feed oneself and a family are essential national concerns. We are encouraged by provisions in the bill that maintain and strengthen portions of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Efforts to provide people a wider array of SNAP training programs for employment are welcome, particularly those in rural communities with limited options. Expanding the 2014 Farm Bill Employment and Training (E&T) Pilot Program, to allow additional states to create evidence-based approaches to reaching underserved populations, is encouraging for the millions of people we serve. Additionally, providing language that pilot projects contain individualized case management will demonstrate how “wrap around” services can assist with removing barriers to employment.

The bill makes a commendable investment in reauthorizing the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). This program is critical to supplementing low-income seniors’ food security. However, the bill falls short of providing local food banks all of the necessary support they require to meet the needs of their communities by underfunding The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Although the bill provides storage and distribution funds at \$100 million, it falls short of our total recommended funding level of \$350 million. As the bill stands, it only provides a modest yearly increase to \$295 million.

We are relieved that many of the provisions contained in the House Farm Bill (H.R. 2) were avoided in this bill, particularly changes to categorical eligibility, excessively burdensome and ineffective work requirements, and denying lifetime benefits to persons who have previously committed certain crimes. We encourage you to ensure that those changes remain out of the final Senate bill.

**International Food Security and Development:** We appreciate the Committee’s steadfast support for international food assistance programs, including Food for Peace, McGovern-Dole, Food for Progress, and the Farmer-to-Farmer programs. These programs help keep famine at bay, provide lifesaving emergency assistance when natural disasters strike, support nutritional assistance by helping school children excel in their studies, and leverage the expertise of American volunteers to support food security outcomes of our poorest brothers and sisters overseas. We are particularly thankful the Committee maintained important reforms provided in the 2014 Farm Bill, and advanced positive changes like removing the monetization requirement in Food for Peace, making permanent local purchase in McGovern-Dole, allowing Community Development Funds to be paired with Food for Peace development activities, and providing direct program support in lieu of monetization for some Food for Progress funding.

**Subsidies:** The bill does a commendable job of assisting small and medium-sized farms and ranchers by maintaining Price Loss Coverage and making modest improvements to Agriculture Risk Coverage insurance. Allowing farmers to update Price Loss Coverage yields to reflect yield reduction due to drought could help many farmers continue to sustain crop production despite past years’ losses. The bill’s protection of the USDA from cuts will enable it to continue to place staff in rural communities to help farmers diversify crops, get access to new markets, and receive assistance on technical issues.

However, further reforms are necessary. We urge the Senate to make changes to commodity subsidies in order to limit farm supports so that small and medium-sized farms and ranches can better compete with larger industrial agriculture who disproportionately benefit from subsidies.

**Conservation:** The conservation title plays an essential role in ensuring that the earth is protected, reminding us of God's invitation to "cultivate and care for" creation. We appreciate the bill's efforts to keep the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) intact, but cuts to funding of these critical working lands programs is disappointing. While the reduction of the annual acreage for CSP from 10 million to 8.8 million is troublesome, provisions that increase the coordination between CSP and EQIP are encouraging. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is improved by an increase to 25 million acres, yet farmers would be compensated less due to limits on local rental rates.

**Rural Development:** Rural communities and small towns are the backbone of the social and economic life of America. Yet their viability is jeopardized by slow economic improvement, aging infrastructure, the opioid epidemic, under-employment, and the movement of younger generations to other communities. Reauthorizing USDA's Rural Development Grants will expand access to high-speed internet in rural areas. Providing \$50 million in permanent funding for the Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach Program (FOTOP) will help socially disadvantaged persons and veterans succeed in the vocation to be farmers and ranchers. We are pleased to see \$60 million in permanent funding for the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP) which provides grants to business and non-profits for new business opportunities and marketing strategies to reduce farm food waste.

We applaud the bipartisan cooperation in the production of S. 3042. This is a crucial time for our nation to put poor and hungry people first, support farmers and ranchers in need, promote sustainable stewardship of the land, and help rural communities both at home and in developing countries. We look forward to continuing to work with you as you deliberate further on the 2018 Farm Bill.

Sincerely yours,

Most Rev. Frank J. Dewane  
Bishop of Venice  
Chair, Committee on Domestic  
Justice and Human Development

Most Rev. Timothy P. Broglio  
Archbishop for the Military Services USA  
Chair, Committee on International Justice  
and Peace

Mr. Sean Callahan  
President  
Catholic Relief Services

Sr. Donna Markham, OP, PhD  
President and CEO  
Catholic Charities, USA

Mr. James Ennis  
Executive Director  
Catholic Rural Life

Mr. Ralph Middlecamp  
President, National Council of the  
U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul