

Why the Farm Bill Matters

by Robert Gronski, policy coordinator
National Catholic Rural Life Conference

Q: How are low-income families able to put food on the table for their children?

A: Nutrition programs in the U.S. farm bill

Q: How are family farms able to keep farming when crop prices are below the cost of production?

A: Farm support programs in the U.S. farm bill.

Q: How can we help protect farmland from environmental harm?

A: Conservation programs in the U.S. farm bill

Q: What can the people of God do to feed the hungry, assure fair treatment of producers, and protect God's creation for present and future generations?

A: Improve the U.S. farm bill.

The Church has a stake in the farm bill, now under revision by Congress. In setting farm and food policies for our nation, the farm bill has a crucial impact on how food is grown, what foods are grown, who grows the food and who is able to eat good, nutritious food.

The Gospel calls all of us to feed the hungry, help the vulnerable among us, and care for God's creation. Many people do so through charitable work in their communities and towns. But it is possible to greatly expand our charitable work by shaping public policy and letting Congress know how we feel about the farm bill.

The time to act is now. The House completed their work on the farm bill in late July; the Senate takes up the farm bill in September. Faith and social justice groups are raising their voices and calling for policies and programs that can truly revitalize and sustain family farms. This is good for rural America and good for all who eat.

But aren't family farms virtually gone? It is true that many who want to farm cannot continue to do so or, if young adults, unable to get started. Farmland is expensive and land rental rates keep increasing, not to mention high costs for machinery, fuel, fertilizer, seeds and other inputs. New policies can be set in place that will replenish the countryside with a multitude of sustainable farmers and ranchers. This can happen in tandem with financial incentives to conserve our natural resources and new programs to revitalize a healthy food system for all.

Farm Bill Policy Priorities

Maintain strong nutrition programs

A top priority is a strong Nutrition program that reauthorizes and improves the Food Stamp Program, the nation's first defense against hunger, and bolsters the efforts of the emergency food assistance system. Ask Congress to maintain full funds for Nutrition, but without pulling funds from crucial farm programs.

Make farm payments fair

Income support payments provide a safety net for farmers who grow crops subject to persistent low prices. However, these payments encourage overproduction and do not fix the low price problem. The House bill continues a failed policy where most payments go to the largest operations. A major first step is to limit the amount any farm operation can receive so that more dollars are available to other agricultural and rural development programs. Ask Congress to support payment limitation and better target support for family farms.

Reward good land & water conservation

The farm bill does not receive the funding needed to adequately conserve land and water on all eligible farms and ranches. The House bill did increase funding for some programs, but improvements and

targeting are still needed. The Senate should enact conservation provisions that better support family farms while promoting land stewardship. Ask Congress to accelerate the conservation of working lands, God's creation, and substantially increase conservation funding, but limit the amount any farm or ranch operation can receive.

Ensure fair and competitive agricultural markets

There are few remaining open and competitive markets where farmers and ranchers can sell their crops and livestock. Markets are increasingly controlled by large multinational corporations. For many farmers attempting to sell their crops and livestock, they must enter into contracts with these corporations. The House bill does not provide sufficient protection against unfair market practices. As a first step, the Senate bill should include a fair competition livestock provision that ensures contracts are fair and markets are open to independent producers.

Restore regional farm markets and local food supplies

The farm bill can help expand the opportunities for farmers and ranchers to sell their products locally and provide fresher and more nutritious foods. In addition, policies increasing public awareness about healthy foods will help build local and regional food systems.

Visit www.ncrlc.com to learn more about these agriculture and food policies and how to talk to Congressional representatives about a fair and just farm bill.