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REPORT



The Newsletter of the
Wisconsin Catholic Conference

2007 Federal Farm Bill Addresses Vital Issues

Every five years, Congress reauthorizes the Farm Bill, a large, complex piece of legislation that sets federal policy for everything from crop subsidies to food stamps. On July 27th, the House passed its version of the bill, known as HR 2419 "Farm, Nutrition, and Bioenergy Act." In September, the Senate is expected to offer its own version.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has several priorities for the 2007 Farm Bill. The first is to **strengthen rural communities**. With the advent of corporate farms, many former family farmers have moved to urban areas, leaving fewer people to contribute to rural communities. The USCCB supports initiatives to help new farmers, to expand education in rural areas, and to improve telecommunications access.

A second priority is to **improve the food stamp program**. The USCCB believes that the five-year waiting period for legal immigrants should be eliminated or shortened, and that benefits should be increased to reflect the true cost of food.

A third priority is to **promote good stewardship of the land**, and in particular, to encourage responsible water and land use, protect wildlife, and maintain fertile soil.

The USCCB also hopes that Congress will **re-evaluate the current crop**

subsidy programs. Subsidies were intended to help family farms during economic downturns. Critics contend that too many crop subsidies go to multi-billion dollar corporations, and encourage them to overproduce corn, soybean, cotton, wheat, and rice.

Furthermore, the USCCB supports **safer working conditions for farm and food workers**. At a minimum, farm owners and meat processors should use the safest pesticides and equipment possible, provide adequate food and shelter for workers, and pay their workers a fair wage.

The final priority proposed by the USCCB is to **fight hunger overseas**. Initially this may take the form of direct aid, but over time, it should also include helping family farmers in underdeveloped countries.

Debate over the Farm Bill has produced sharp disagreements, particularly in the area of crop subsidies. The USCCB, working in coalition with Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and others, supports closing existing loopholes that permit large corporations to collect millions of dollars in crop subsidies. The USCCB does not, however, support dismantling the subsidy system altogether, since it helps sustain many family farms during economic downturns.

Article by WCC Intern Alex Wagner

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Director's Corner

John Huebscher, Executive Director

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference is the public policy voice of Wisconsin's Roman Catholic bishops. As such, our testimony reflects the views of the bishops. But these positions are not crafted in isolation. On the contrary, the bishops want their views to be informed by the best that Catholics have to offer.

As one might expect, the primary source for all our work is the teachings of the Church. Thus the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* are valuable resources as we prepare testimony and statements. Papal encyclicals, Church Council documents, and statements from Vatican Congregations, which are often cited in the *Catechism* and *Compendium*, are useful as well.

The insights of diocesan and parish leaders are also vital to helping us formulate our statements and testimony. The experience and wisdom of a Catholic charities agency is useful in discussing issues like adoption or human services programs. The views of Catholic school leaders come into play in education issues. Testimony on health care is always enhanced when we consult leaders of Catholic hospitals, diocesan health care coordinators, and Catholic ethicists. Diocesan finance officers, cemetery directors, directors of pro-life/justice and peace offices, chancellors and pastors in parishes have also offered valued counsel over the years.

Catholics "in the pew" are also helpful to our work. Our 15-member Policy Group meets twice a year to help us examine issues we have not faced before. At times, we also reach out to lay Catholics known to have specific experience with the issue in question.

On occasion, our homework takes us beyond Wisconsin. Many times, the experience and testimony of Catholic conferences in other states provides background and data to strengthen our own analysis.

Taken together, all this helps to ensure that the background we provide the bishops reflects the best information and soundest insights of Catholics in Wisconsin and throughout the Church.

Health Care Reform Emerges in Budget Process

While elected officials agree that the current health care system exposes many Wisconsin residents to rising medical costs, how to reform the system continues to be a point of contention.

Senate Democrats have included the "Healthy Wisconsin" reform proposal as a key component of their version of the state budget. They assert that under this plan almost every resident will have access to health care coverage. Modeled after the state employee health insurance program, Healthy Wisconsin would provide comprehensive medical care for individuals under age 65 and require that they enroll in one of several state-endorsed private health insurance plans.

Senators want to fund the program through employee and employer contributions. An employee earning the state's average salary would contribute approximately \$140 per month, with the employer's contribution being \$370 per month. The program includes an annual deductible, co-payments, and co-insurance.

For more information on Healthy Wisconsin, visit <http://www.healthywisconsin.net/>, or the Senate Democrats' Healthy Wisconsin website at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/senate/sdc/Issues/HealthyWisconsin.asp>.

Assembly Republicans have offered their own reform proposal called "Patients First." Supporters assert that this proposal, which promotes the increased use of tax incentives and health savings accounts, will strengthen consumer control over the industry and decrease costs through provider competition. The initiative aims to reform the current health care system through market pressure for increased transparency, greater efficiency, and improved quality.

A brief summary of the "Patients First" initiative is offered on Assembly Assistant Majority Leader Mark Gundrum's (R-New Berlin) website at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/assembly/asm84/news/041907.htm>.

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WCC Opposes Redefining Abortion

Senator Judy Robson (D-Beloit) and Representative Christine Sinicki (D-Milwaukee) have introduced companion bills (SB 232 and AB 467) that would require every Wisconsin pharmacist to promptly dispense a valid prescription for any contraceptive approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA), unless such a prescription is contraindicated for a particular patient.

In addition, the bills would redefine the meaning of abortion in Wisconsin statutes by eliminating the current language that states that “an ‘unborn child’ means a human being from the time of conception until it is born alive” and substituting instead that abortion excludes “the use, administration, delivery, prescribing, or dispensing of any federal-food-and-drug-administration-approved contraceptive.”

“The Catholic Conference opposes this type of legislation for three reasons,” WCC Associate Director for Respect Life and Social Concerns, Barbara Sella, explained. “First, this redefinition of abortion is unscientific. Modern science tells us that the union of an egg and sperm at conception marks the beginning of a new human life.”

“Second, the proposed legislation would alter all of our state’s existing abortion laws in a manner that affects not just pharmacists, but anyone involved in the protection of human life. And third, it overly restricts the civil rights of pharmacists in relation to other health care professionals.”

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Health Care, from page 2

Governor Jim Doyle proposed increasing access to health care in his budget through an expansion of the BadgerCare program known as BadgerCare Plus. A state-based health care coverage system, BadgerCare focuses on providing coverage for limited means families with children. By allowing children aging out of foster care, childless adults, and others who have difficulty obtaining health care coverage to join the BadgerCare program, the executive branch estimates that 98 percent of Wisconsin citizens would have access to health care.

For more information on BadgerCare Plus, visit <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/badgercareplus/>.

As a provider, employer, and advocate, the Church brings a unique perspective to the health care debate. The WCC asks that you please take time to analyze these initiatives and measure them against the Church’s criteria for health care reform. A listing of the Church’s criteria can be found at http://www.wisconsin.nasccd.org/bins/wisconsin/content/pages/Statements/Healthcare.HTM?_resolutionfile=ftppath|pages/Statements/Healthcare.HTM.

At this point, WCC has not endorsed a specific proposal, though it may do so at some point. Rather, the Conference will focus on: 1) reminding people of the importance of this issue, and 2) identifying the principles that should guide the debate.

“Whether health care reform is part of the budget or dealt with in separate legislation, the debate will be one of the most important of the decade,” observed WCC Executive Director John Huebscher. “And it is a debate in which Catholics should play a key part.”

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WCC Urges Committee Action on Budget

The Committee of Conference on Senate Bill 40 (the biennial budget bill) began meeting on July 25, 2007. Conference Committee members seek to resolve differences between Senate and Assembly versions of the 2007-09 state budget. Membership on the Committee is split between the two houses of the legislature and, this session, both major parties are equally represented on the Committee.

Representing the Senate are Senate Majority Leader Judy Robson (D-Beloit), Joint Finance Committee co-chair Russ Decker (D-Weston), Senator Bob Jauch (D-Poplar), and Senate Minority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau). The Assembly is represented by House Speaker Mike Huebsch (R-West Salem), Assembly Majority Leader Jeff Fitzgerald (R-Horicon), Joint Finance Committee co-chair Kitty Rhoades (R-Hudson), and Assembly Minority Leader Jim Kreuser (D-Kenosha).

Progress in Conference Committee has been slow and Committee members have stated that a compromise on the budget will not likely be reached until well after Labor Day. The current budget ended July 1, 2007. Under Wisconsin law, state agencies and

other entities continue operating at budget levels from the prior fiscal year until a new budget is passed.

Prior to the commencement of the Conference Committee's first meeting, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference distributed a memo to members, identifying budget initiatives that the WCC supports.

The WCC urged legislators to forward a budget that protects human life, pursues social justice, and promotes families. The WCC recommends, among other things, increasing funds for homeless shelters, providing at-risk pregnant women and mothers greater assistance with their child care and living expenses, expanding the School Choice program, and investing more resources in offender treatment and diversion programs.

To view all WCC budget recommendations, visit www.wisconsinatholic.org and click on "WCC

Recommendations for State Budget (7/23/07)" under the "What's New" section of the WCC home page.

Please contact members of the Wisconsin Legislature's Conference Committee and urge them to support the Wisconsin Catholic Conference's recommendations for the 2007-09 state budget.

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