



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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FARM BILL 2007: GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

By Barbara Sella, Associate Director for Respect Life and Social Concerns

Every five to six years, Congress reauthorizes federal legislation related to farming and nutrition. Known as the Farm Bill, this is one of the most complex and comprehensive pieces of legislation, affecting not only the smallest farmer in the United States, but also the poorest person in developing countries. Since the Bill expires this year, Congress is currently drafting new legislation.

The Bill is of interest to the Catholic Church because it touches on so many principles of the Church's social teaching: life and dignity of the human person, family, dignity of work, common good, preferential option for the poor, subsidiarity, participation, solidarity, and stewardship of creation.

The Farm Bill has its origins in the Great Depression when, in order to provide farmers with a safety-net, the federal government introduced a commodity payment system that guarantees farmers minimum prices for their crops and enables them to sell some of their crops to the federal government when markets are depressed.

Back then the main beneficiaries of this federal assistance were small family farmers, since 25 percent of all Americans lived on farms. Today, when only two percent of Americans live on farms, these federal commodity payments or subsidies for crops such as corn, wheat, cotton, and soybeans most often benefit large-scale commercial farms.

Because these large commercial farms are able to receive federal subsidies, they have every incentive to overproduce certain crops, and this lowers world prices to the point that small farmers in developing countries cannot compete. Given that half the world's population derives its income from agriculture and most of the world's poorest people live in rural areas, America's farm policies have a profound effect on billions of people.

Cotton subsidies are a prime example of why the current Farm Bill is in need of reform. The U.S. has 25,000 cotton producers who receive more in commodity payments from the U.S. government than the government spends on foreign aid and debt cancellation to all of Africa. The overproduction of cotton that results from these federal subsidies drives down world prices and makes it increasingly difficult for the *twenty million* Africans involved in cotton production to earn a living.

The key to sustaining rural communities in the U.S. and abroad is to restructure the current commodity-payment system, so that billions of dollars of commodity money can be redirected into four main areas:

Rural development programs in the U.S. that encourage small family farms and minority farmers, support rural businesses and regional development, and promote the spread of broadband internet access and other technologies.

Nutrition programs that increase benefits and broaden participation in Food Stamps, encourage greater consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, foster greater connections between local farmers and poor and elderly consumers, and strengthen support for emergency food banks.

Conservation programs that promote responsible stewardship by reducing soil erosion, improving water quality, protecting wildlife habitats, and developing renewable energy.

Overseas food-aid and development programs that provide food for disaster-stricken areas and allow poor farmers in developing countries to earn a decent living.

The U.S. and Wisconsin Bishops urge people of faith and all people of good will to contact their Congressional representatives before July 9th, urging them to reauthorize a reformed Farm Bill that will truly provide a dignified livelihood to farmers around the world and help to ensure that everyone can receive their daily bread.