



## ECUMENICAL ADVOCACY DAYS

FOR GLOBAL PEACE WITH JUSTICE

# At God's Table

## Food Justice for a Healthy World

April 8, 2013 Lobby Day Congressional Ask

### **The Farm Bill:**

#### *What it is, why it's important*

**Our nation's food and farm policies, as embodied in the farm bill, affect people from rural America to inner cities, from our local communities to less industrialized regions around the world. In the current budget climate, the farm bill's limited resources must be effectively targeted where need is greatest. Programs and policies that alleviates hunger and malnutrition, supports vibrant farms and healthy communities, and protect God's creation must be prioritized.**

In many ways, the federal programs authorized in the farm bill define our food system. Farm bill anti-hunger programs help millions of Americans living in poverty get enough food to eat, and the Food for Peace program provides emergency food aid to millions of hungry people around the world. Federal farm programs support the farmers who grow our food and the systems that move the food from farms to tables. And farm bill programs promote good soil and water management on working farm- and rangeland and help to retire marginally productive land, as a means to protect resources for future generations.

The most recently passed farm bill is a \$288 billion, five-year agricultural policy bill that was passed into law by the United States Congress in June 2008. The bill includes 15 different titles covering everything from farm credit to agricultural research to funding for farmers markets.

Funding for the 2008 Farm Bill began to expire on September 30, 2012. At the end of 2012, Congress extended the farm bill until September 30, 2013, but even with this extension a number of programs currently have zero funding. The list of those without funding includes programs that support farmers markets, programs to help beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers get started, and the Conservation Stewardship Program which promotes conservation practices on working farms and ranches. Other farm bill programs, in particular the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—formerly known as food stamps), are often cited as places to cut during discussions over deficit reduction and balancing the federal budget.

*Congress has an opportunity this year to pass a multi-year farm bill that creates a more just food system, reduces hunger and poverty in the U.S. and around the world, supports vibrant farms and rural communities and encourages farming practices that protect God's creation.*

## **Alleviate hunger and malnutrition**

### **Protect and strengthen programs that reduce hunger and improve nutrition in the United States**

The domestic nutrition programs in the farm bill play a critical role in combating hunger. Despite the wealth of resources in the United States, 48.8 million Americans are at risk of hunger: one in six adults and one in five children. Particularly in tough economic times, many of those living in poverty depend upon federal nutrition assistance programs to feed themselves and their families. The majority of those who receive this assistance are children, the elderly, or people living with a disability. These recipients also include individuals with low-wage, full-time jobs, and military families. For these families, assistance programs, including SNAP, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the federal school lunch program, are the last line of defense against poverty. These programs—particularly SNAP, because it is the largest of federal nutrition programs—plays a critical role in reducing hunger and helping families move closer to the poverty line and, ultimately, cycle out of poverty. . Federal nutrition programs not only aid direct need, but help create long-term self-sufficiency and reduce poverty.

### **Sustain robust international food aid and improve the nutritional quality of food aid.**

The farm bill provides for the U.S. Agency for International Development-administered Food for Peace program, which received around \$1.5 billion in fiscal year 2012, as well as the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program, funded at around \$200 million. This assistance amounts to between 0.5 and 0.6 percent of the nearly trillion-dollar farm bill, but it is vital in a world facing a triple food security threat of high food prices, the impact of natural disasters, and the consequences of humanitarian crises. Since Food for Peace began in 1954, more than three billion people in 150 countries have benefited directly from U.S. food aid. At present, it provides food and assistance for millions of children, women, and men in 44 countries who are suffering from hunger and malnutrition. There is some discussion within the Administration and Congress about moving food aid funding to other accounts outside the Farm Bill. Wherever this program is lodged, it is vital that it be fully funded.

Reducing maternal and child malnutrition—especially in the critical 1,000 days between pregnancy and age 2—is a key priority of U.S. global food security and health initiatives, and food aid is an essential tool in tackling malnutrition. As the world’s largest provider of food aid, the United States can lead the way in improving its quality to better target undernourished women and children. Setting the goal of improving maternal and child nutrition as a central program objective would help align food aid investments with those being made in Feed the Future and the Global Health Initiative. Lipid-based, fortified, and other nutrition-dense products, already included in the food aid commodities list, should be more widely procured and distributed in areas of high malnutrition. Successful pilot program nutrition interventions must move quickly “to scale.”

## **Support vibrant farms and healthy communities**

### **Help beginning farmers and farmers from socially disadvantaged groups start in the business of agriculture**

In the 1930s when modern farm policy was created, millions of people depended upon farming and ranching for their livelihoods. Most farms were relatively small operations that fed people

locally, or perhaps regionally, and they produced a variety of crops and livestock for the consumption of the family that owned the land and for the benefit of its surrounding community.

Fast forward 80 years or so, and American agriculture is profoundly different. Although the vast majority of farms are still family-owned operations, many of them are multimillion-dollar businesses encompassing thousands of acres and are growing food that is shipped around the country and around the world. These farms are highly efficient and highly productive, but their scale of operations has profoundly impacted the rural communities that surround them. These communities have seen their populations drop dramatically as farms grow ever larger, and the average age of their residents climbs as children graduate from school and, unable to find good jobs in their hometowns, leave to find work in cities. The average age of farmers continues to climb as well: In 2007, when the last farm bill was written, the average farmer was 58 years old; in 1945, the average farmer was 39 years old. And the increasing size and economic clout of large farms has driven up the price of farmland in many parts of the country, making it difficult for beginning farmers to enter the business unless they are in a position to inherit an existing farm.

Since 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been directing more funds toward the development of a new generation of farmers, and their efforts are beginning to bear fruit. Small farms, operated by younger and more diverse farmers, including women and minorities, are increasing in all parts of the country. Programs like the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program and the Outreach and Technical Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers program provide the extra support that new and non-traditional farmers need to get started in the business of farming. These programs fund education, extension, outreach, and technical assistance aimed at helping new farmers successfully acquire, own, operate, and retain farms and ranches.

### **Build local and regional food systems and the rural communities at their center.**

#### **- *In the United States...***

The past decade has seen a transformation in the way we view our food and has provided an opportunity for agricultural communities to rebuild their economies, care for the land, and attract a new generation of farmers. Growing demand for "local" food has driven explosive growth in farmers' markets and other "direct to consumer" marketing by smaller farmers. The new interest in local, organic and seasonal food, coupled with public health concerns about obesity, particularly among our children and youth, and the recognition that in many communities in our country access to fresh and healthy food is limited, have combined to generate new opportunities and markets for farmers and rural economies.

In recent years, many in the public health community have become increasingly concerned about not only whether Americans have enough to eat, but also whether we are eating a healthy diet. Growing rates of obesity, particularly among children, have raised concerns about whether children are eating enough healthy food. In some cases, poor diet is linked to a lack of access to fresh and healthy foods: so-called "food deserts" in both urban and rural communities lack stores that sell fresh fruits and vegetables, and the heavily processed, low-cost food sold at these stores is not the basis of a healthy diet.

These concerns have led the U.S. Department of Agriculture to target programs to bring more fresh fruits and vegetables to urban and rural food deserts. Programs such as the *Farmers Market Promotion Program*, the *Farmers Market Electronic Benefit Transfer Program*, the *Senior Farmers Market Program*, and the *National Organic Certification Cost Share Program* support

the growth of local and regional markets, help small farmers find markets for their products, and help underserved communities gain access to healthier foods. **All of these programs currently have no funding due to the expiration of the 2008 Farm Bill.**

The *Farmers Market Promotion Program* helps to establish and expand direct to consumer markets, providing new markets for small and mid-sized farmers, offering consumers the opportunity to support local producers and giving people in vulnerable communities greater access to fresh food. Since 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has focused funding from the *Farmers Market Promotion Program* on developing new markets in underserved communities, so-called “food deserts” where fresh food is often difficult to obtain and where obesity rates, particularly among children, are high. The *Farmers Market Electronic Benefit Transfer* program allows SNAP recipients to use their electronic benefit cards at farmers' markets, helping families living in poverty gain better access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The *Senior Farmers Market Program* gives low-income seniors coupons that can be exchanged for fruits and vegetables at Farmers Markets.

The *National Organic Certification Cost Share* program helps small farmers to offset the substantial costs of moving from conventional farming methods to high value organic agriculture. Strong consumer demand for organic food is providing new and growing market opportunities for farmers. Organic agriculture supported \$31.5 billion in sales in 2011 (Organic Trade Association statistics). Organic certification is a complex annual process with multiple steps. For many farmers, especially small farm businesses, the annual costs of certification prevent them from taking advantage of this growing market.

- ***Around the world...***

While U.S. food aid provides critical life-support for millions of people, it can be improved to reach more hungry people faster and more effectively strengthen local and regional food systems and improve food security. Under existing law, the U.S. must purchase, process, and ship the majority of its aid from our country to communities in need around the globe. Not only is this approach slower and more expensive than necessary, it can also undermine long-term rural development in affected regions by distorting local markets and undercutting prices for local farmers.

Under a pilot program begun in the 2008 farm bill, a portion of food aid can now be purchased from markets in or near the areas where it will be used. Local and Regional Procurement makes sense on every level: it gets food to those in need more than twice as fast and uses taxpayer dollars more efficiently. Most importantly, it helps local and regional farmers grow their production capacity, which supports U.S. long-term agricultural development goals. Additionally, buying a greater portion of food locally reduces the costs and use of energy and other resources associated with shipping food great distances.

**Protect God's creation**

**Strengthen policies and programs that promote conservation of soil and water and protect creation from environmental degradation**

Nearly 50 percent of the land in the lower 48 United States is privately-owned farm- or ranchland. Farms and ranches not only produce food and fiber, but also are uniquely positioned to protect soil and water quality, provide habitat for wildlife, and serve as a barrier to sprawling

suburban growth. For these reasons, the farm bill also includes a number of critical farm conservation programs that apply to both working lands and provide for land set asides in environmentally sensitive areas.

Since 1985, each succeeding farm bill has generated new farm conservation programs. The most recent addition to the farm bill's conservation title is the Conservation Stewardship Program, added in 2008. The Conservation Stewardship Program allows farmers and ranchers to receive support payments to fund both existing conservation activities on their land and additional conservation practices. The Conservation Stewardship Program and other programs that encourage conservation of working farm and ranch lands received nearly 50 percent of the 2008 farm bill's conservation funding; yet even with the increase in funding provided in the 2008 bill, farmer demand for conservation assistance dollars has continued to outstrip the funding available.

In recent years, programs in the farm bill's conservation title have often served as a "piggy bank" for other priorities. Despite the important goals and popularity of these programs, each year since 2010, Congress has voted to cut conservation funding, including funding for the Conservation Stewardship Program, to fund other programs and priorities in the federal budget. In fact, last summer, when the House of Representatives was considering assistance to farmers and livestock producers suffering losses due to the Midwest drought, bill sponsors proposed taking the majority of funding for that assistance from the conservation title of the farm bill. These cuts were proposed despite the fact that good soil and water management practices can help reduce crop and animal losses during a drought. And in September, Congress passed a continuing resolution to fund the federal government through mid-March, which cut funding to the Conservation Stewardship Program, preventing the program from enrolling any new farmers in the program this year.