



National Catholic Rural Life Conference

May 12, 2008

Dear Member of Congress:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, National Catholic Rural Life Conference and Catholic Relief Services, we write to share with you our perspective on the reauthorization of the 2008 Farm Bill.

As the U.S. Bishops stated in *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers*, "The primary goals of agricultural policies should be providing food for all people and reducing poverty among farmers and farm workers in this country and abroad." Access to adequate nutrition is a basic human right. The economic downturn and recent spike in food prices have resulted in increasing numbers of people turning to food banks for assistance; an additional 1.3 million people on food stamps as compared to last year; and unrest and growing emergency food aid needs in some of the poorest nations of the world. Hunger is a fundamental issue of human life and dignity.

Our organizations are encouraged by news that the House and Senate negotiators have included important investments in the areas of domestic nutrition programs, international food security aid, conservation and rural development. We appreciate in particular the strong funding levels being allocated for domestic nutrition (Title IV) of the Farm Bill. This title has been significantly improved, and it should be included in any Farm Bill passed by Congress.

We are deeply disappointed that the current agreement does not include critical reforms to existing inequitable farm supports (Title I). We urge you to craft legislation that more justly structures farm price supports, reflects basic moral principles, and responds to the real needs of the most vulnerable farmers and families in the United States and around the world. We urge you to address the issue of farm support payments which often go to the most affluent. Removing incentives that can lead to misuses of the subsidy system and mandating effective income caps for eligibility will result in a more equitable and effective Farm Bill. Meaningful reforms within Title I can help address the inequities of the current system and create savings that can be used for urgent priorities such as feeding the hungry at home and abroad. Reform is needed to ensure that limited resources are targeted to those who need them most.

Modest efforts to cap farm price supports are needed so that limited resources can be appropriately redistributed to farmers and ranchers with smaller and moderate-sized operations. All-time high returns in some parts of the agriculture sector require an end to the unjust and wasteful concentration of supports to the largest and wealthiest operations.

We recognize and welcome the efforts of Congressional leaders coming together and making strong investments in key agricultural priorities:

Domestic Hunger

We appreciate efforts to provide substantial ten-year funding for nutrition investments in the Food Stamp Program and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Raising food stamp benefit levels, increasing the standard deductions and the minimum monthly benefit will enable more people in need to access this essential safety net program. Indexing food stamp improvements and increasing mandatory funding levels for TEFAP are important improvements. Lifting the cap on dependent care deductions and excluding retirement and college savings from asset limits are also welcomed. We also urge support for provisions in the Senate-passed version that allow food stamp recipients to build up assets while receiving food stamps.

Our Catholic parishes and social service agencies are experiencing a significant increase in requests for food. Many clients are people that are working but are unable to meet the high demand of the cost of food. Food stamp dollars are declining as the price of food is going up; eggs, milk, bread and poultry are becoming less and less available. The eroding purchasing power of the 26 million families currently receiving nutrition assistance must be addressed.

Global Food Aid

We also welcome food security aid reforms that (1) establish a “safebox” in PL 480 Title II resources for development to aid those suffering from chronic hunger; (2) strengthen the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust so that it can respond more effectively during crises (3) expand section 202(e) cash resources to strengthen food aid programs through a higher minimum percentage of funding for operational activities and extension of this provision to all funding mechanisms; (4) mandate a pilot program, which includes the participation of private voluntary organizations (PVOs), for the purchase of food locally or regionally from resident farmers; and (5) authorize up to \$2.5 billion for Food for Peace.

We remain concerned about the funding levels for the developmental “safebox” and the McGovern Dole Food for Nutrition Program. The authorizations do not fully address the needs and opportunities for overseas agricultural and educational development – as they did respectively in the Senate and House versions of the Farm Bill. We further express concern that any waiver that allows tapping Food for Peace developmental aid for emergencies should include a mandate to fully replenish both the Emerson Trust and the “safebox.”

We welcome the inclusion of an extended 202(e) cash authority and a five-year program to provide and evaluate the use of cash for local or regional purchase. Such an expansion and study are long overdue. We regret, however, that the conference agreement apparently does not come substantially closer to our originally stated desire to provide up to 25% of Title II resources, particularly for use by PVOs, for local or regional purchase from resident producers. This useful change would permit greater flexibility in addressing hunger needs, particularly in times of crisis as we now face.

Conservation and Alternative Energy

We urge adequate funding for conservation initiatives that promote good stewardship of the land and environmentally sound agricultural practices. These provisions include mandatory funding for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and increased program access for small and moderate-sized farming and ranch operations.

In addition, we welcome efforts by Congressional leaders to redirect more funding towards alternate sources of energy not derived from sources also used as food. Caution is needed to ensure that our efforts to move away from the use of fossil fuels for environmental and security reasons do not reduce our capability to provide adequate nutrition for the poor.

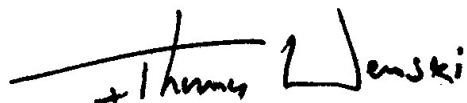
Rural Development

We strongly urge you to support essential funding for beginning, socially disadvantaged, and small and mid-size farms and ranches; rural entrepreneur and micro-enterprise assistance programs; and improved access to broadband telecommunications services for underserved rural communities.

Finally, essential and overdue farm worker protections from pesticide exposure were addressed only in the House version of the Farm Bill. We urge you to enact better protections for farm workers and increased funding for studies on health risks associated with pesticide exposure, especially the effect on pregnant mothers and children, born and unborn. The Farm Bill should require all pesticides used in agricultural production to be reported. Labels with usage instruction and health risks, including the long-term health effects of pesticides, would help protect farm workers who suffer from neurological disorders, cancer, birth defects and other adverse reproductive outcomes at a higher rate than the normal population. Most work without health insurance or access to workers' compensation.

Two years ago, when our organizations began to work together in the Catholic community on the 2007 Farm Bill, we hoped to help shape national food and farm policies that served "the least of these" and truly promoted the common good. We thank Congress for its efforts to craft a fairer and more responsible Farm Bill that would strengthen rural communities and serve our one human family. We continue to implore Congress to reauthorize a five year Farm Bill that effectively addresses the inequities of the nation's commodity supports and that provides sufficient resources for fighting both domestic and global hunger.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Wenski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'T'.

Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski
Bishop of Orlando
Chairman, Committee on International Policy

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Jim Ennis
Executive Director
National Catholic Rural Life Conference



Ken Hackett
President
Catholic Relief Services

cc: USDA Secretary Edward Schaefer
USDA Deputy Secretary Charles Conner
OMB Director James Nussle