



National Catholic Rural Life Conference

July 11, 2011

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader, U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader, U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Minority Leader, U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Reid, Minority Leader McConnell,
Speaker Boehner and Minority Leader Pelosi:

Our nation stands at a critical juncture as it struggles to reduce future unsustainable deficits while at the same time promoting the common good, with a special attention to poor and vulnerable people at home and abroad. We write again to remind you that the budget is a moral document and also to recommend an example of fiscal and moral responsibility. Reforming federal commodity programs by capping the amounts given to farmers and targeting actual need could save billions of dollars per year. These savings could be used to reduce the deficit and preserve lifesaving domestic nutrition and international food assistance programs for the hungry and malnourished.

As Pope Benedict XVI recently stated, there is a “primary right of all individuals to nourishment and freedom from hunger. ... Nourishment is a factor which touches on the fundamental right to life.” For this reason food is unlike other products and commodities. Its production and distribution carry unique moral significance. This is why we strongly support lifesaving domestic nutritional assistance and international food aid programs; the hungry people they serve have a special moral claim on limited resources.

The U.S. bishops have consistently supported targeting price supports to favor small and medium-size farmers for whom assistance is essential to counter the uncertainties of weather and global markets. However, current U.S. policy allows for billions of dollars in farm payments that function as subsidies for many large corporate farms and landowners who do not depend on government assistance for their survival. In some cases subsidies even go to landowners not to grow crops. Given recent sharp increases in food prices and the demands placed on our economy, such an allocation of public dollars seems irresponsible and unwise.

Such subsidies often greatly disadvantage smaller-scale farmers in our own nation and in developing countries. As a result, these farmers are simply not able to compete. Some U.S. agricultural subsidies undermine livelihoods and devastate local agricultural production and economies. For example, in recent years Catholic bishops from Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso have met with members of Congress and Administration officials to plead for African cotton

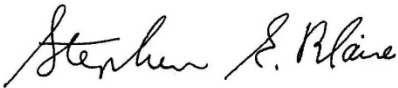
Letter to Congressional Leadership
July 11, 2011
Page 2

farmers who are adversely affected by trade-distorting U.S. farm subsidies. U.S. agriculture policy should support initiatives that promote the well being of family farms both at home and abroad who play a vital role in ensuring stable food security rather than undermine their efforts.

Agricultural subsidies can also lead to commodity speculation as some investors buy large quantities of commodities in search of speculative profits, increasing prices and world hunger, contributing to a world food crisis. In addressing this concern Pope Benedict XVI has stated, "How can we remain silent before the fact that food has become the object of speculation and is tied to the movements of financial markets which, lacking clear rules and moral principles, seem fixated on the single objective of profit?"

When given a choice between protecting the life and dignity of the poor or the interests of the powerful, the poor and vulnerable must come first. We urge new policies which reflect a clear priority for feeding the hungry and addressing nutrition needs at home and abroad over subsidies that disadvantage small and medium-scale farms in the United States and poor farmers in developing countries.

Sincerely yours,



Most Reverend Stephen E. Blaire
Bishop of Stockton
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development



Most Reverend Howard J. Hubbard
Bishop of Albany
Chairman, Committee on International
Justice and Peace



Ken Hackett
President
Catholic Relief Services



Jim Ennis
President
National Catholic Rural Life Conference