



CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE



Catholic Charities USA

Working to Reduce Poverty in America.



April 24, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
United States Senate

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
United States Senate

The Honorable Glenn “GT” Thompson
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable David Scott
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture
United States House of Representatives

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, Chairman Thompson, and Ranking Member Scott:

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Rural Life, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are committed to ending hunger, both domestically and worldwide. In the words of Pope Francis, “Hunger is criminal, food is an inalienable right.”¹ As you consider provisions to include in the 2023 Farm Bill, we wish to offer you some guiding principles and policy priorities in addressing and alleviating hunger.

The cost of food has increased significantly due to inflation. This puts particular stress on the poorest families to get enough to eat and be healthy. In this environment, nutrition programs that support the basic right to food should be strengthened, not weakened.

In this year’s Farm Bill, we encourage you to prioritize sufficient funding of programs that feed hungry families, both here and abroad, while opposing efforts to weaken the efficacy of or access to these programs. We ask you to provide a safety net for farmers and continue a reasonable amount of support for our commodity and dairy farmers, prioritizing vulnerable farmers and small and moderate-sized family farms. We urge you to help rural communities by encouraging rural development and promoting the culture and well-being of rural America. We also recommend that you promote sustainable stewardship of the land.

As you deliberate on how best to proceed with the 2023 Farm Bill, we submit to you the following principles and areas that should be prioritized:²

Domestic Hunger and Nutrition: Food is a basic need and a human right. Food production and distribution are critical national concerns. The most recent reports from the U.S. Department of Agriculture indicate that nearly 34 million Americans, adults and children, lived in food-insecure households in 2021. This urgent need must be addressed, and funding for programs that feed hungry families must be prioritized. The following programs and measures are critical to meeting the needs of hungry people.

- **The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** helped feed more than 41 million Americans in 2021 and lifted nearly 3 million out of poverty. It is responsive to increased and decreased periods of need and continues to have one of the lowest fraud rates for federal programs. **SNAP should be strengthened** through updates to calculations that account for rising food prices, improvement to the standard medical deduction, elimination of the cap on the Excess Shelter Deduction, and increased benefits for households with young children. Additional funding would be helpful for SNAP Employment and Training as well as SNAP Education.

¹ Pope Francis, Address to the Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements (Oct 28, 2014). https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141028_incontro-mondiale-movimenti-popolari.html

² This is an initial letter that most likely will be supplemented in certain areas during the legislative process leading to the enactment of the 2023 Farm Bill, as needed or requested.

- We also ask you to consider **expanding SNAP eligibility** in the following ways: improve the Asset Limit to incentivize building savings, allow states to use State Median Income (SMI) rather than the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to determine eligibility, and raise income eligibility above the current 130% FPL to a reasonable measure based on inflation. All U.S. territories should participate in SNAP and be brought into parity with the states.³ State flexibility around waiving or scaling back work requirements should be preserved given present and future economic uncertainties, and the three-month time limit for Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) should be eliminated. Furthermore, it's unconscionable that any members of the armed services and their families should have food security issues, and access should be improved for military families. Access should also be improved for students, lawfully present immigrants and refugees, and seniors. Formerly incarcerated individuals should be able to access SNAP. We support finding ways for greater self-governance and food sovereignty for Tribal Nations. SNAP outreach and enrollment can also be improved, for example, through a single point of entry, pre-approval for those affected by disasters, and technological assistance for states.
- **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)** should be strengthened through additional mandatory funding, allowing the Department of Agriculture to retain the authority to purchase bonus commodities in times of high need and low prices, increasing support for the Farm to Food Bank program without the state match requirement, and supporting policies to make food donation easier.
- We ask you to **increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables** through programs such as the **Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Incentive Program (SFMNP)**, the **Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP)**, and through **infrastructure support to food banks** for refrigeration and distribution of fresh produce.

International Food Security and Development: We appreciate the Committee's steadfast support for international food assistance programs, including **Food for Peace, McGovern-Dole, Food for Progress, and the Farmer-to-Farmer programs, in addition to the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust.** These programs keep famine at bay, improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers so they can feed their families, help school children excel in their studies, and leverage the expertise of American farming volunteers to support food security outcomes. We are particularly thankful to the Committee for maintaining important reforms included in the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills. Prior legislative changes, such as eliminating the monetization requirement in Food for Peace, making permanent funding available for local and regional procurement (LRP) in McGovern-Dole, and allowing the pairing of Community Development Funds with Food for Peace development activities strengthen and enhance the impact of these programs. We also look forward to continuing work with the Agriculture Committee to advance additional reforms, such as **expanding LRP in McGovern-Dole to support the local ownership of school feeding programs and increasing flexibility in Food for Peace non-emergency activities to design programs that are cost effective, appropriate for the context, and reach as many people as possible.**

Conservation: The Catholic Church urges an integral ecology that recognizes a "certain reciprocity: as we care for creation, we realize that God, through creation, cares for us."⁴ Programs that focus on stewardship of working and retired lands and easements and partnerships, such as the **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP),** should receive special attention. Conservation programs should also include solutions to address carbon capture, climate mitigation, adaptation, food waste and ensuring access for all

³ Currently, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands receive approximately 60% of what states receive under SNAP, while other U.S. territories (Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands) have parity with state funding levels. This inequality should be resolved.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace (Jan 1, 2010). https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliiii-world-day-peace.html

these programs to applicants who experienced historic disparities and discrimination, especially Black farmers.

Subsidies: The Commodity Title was established to provide a safety net for farmers. It is important to continue support for commodity and dairy farms, as well as specialty crops, to encourage diversified production. It is imperative to protect against cuts to the USDA that would impact its ability to place staff in rural communities to help farmers diversify crops, get access to new markets, and receive assistance on technical issues. Given federal budget constraints, agricultural subsidies and direct payments must be targeted to small and moderate-sized farms, especially those of Black farmers and other historically marginalized groups, and payment limits must be enforced. Government resources should assist those who truly need assistance and support those who comply with environmentally sound and sustainable farming practices. Lastly, subsidy levels should not lower the international market price of commodities to the detriment of local farmers in resource poor countries.

Rural Development: Rural communities and small towns are an essential component of the social and economic life of America. Yet, their viability is jeopardized by slow economic improvement, aging infrastructure, the opioid epidemic, under-employment, and the movement of younger generations to other communities. Effective policies and programs are needed to encourage rural development and promote the culture and well-being of rural America. Young farmers and their families should be supported and encouraged to fortify the profession and strengthen the national food supply. Climate change mitigation and adaptation must be integrated into rural development policies by, for example, adding climate resilience to **Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural America (ATTRA)** program services and increased funding for climate research through USDA's **Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Mission Area**. Crucial rural infrastructure investments, as well as innovative programs not funded in the permanent Farm Bill baseline, deserve to be emphasized, such as the **Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP)**, **Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI)**, and the **Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program, Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural America (ATTRA)**, among others.

Now is a critical time to hear both the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth, to consider the needs of the hungry, of underserved farmers, and of rural communities. We look forward to working with you as you shape the 2023 Farm Bill.

Sincerely,



Most Rev. Borys Gudziak
Archbishop of Ukrainian Catholic
Archeparchy of Philadelphia
Chair, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development



Mr. Sean Callahan
President
Catholic Relief Services



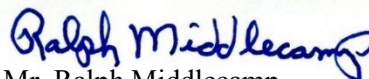
Mr. James Ennis
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Most Rev. David J. Malloy
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Sr. Donna Markham, OP, PhD
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Mr. Ralph Middlecamp
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