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Help ensure that all receive their daily bread

Tony Magliano | Apr. 30, 2012 Making a Difference

Every person who has enough nutritious food to eat and cares about the 1 billion people who do not should be paying attention to the 2012 Farm Bill.

At stake are deep and heartless congressional monetary cuts to national and international food assistance programs, environmentally protective farm and ranch conservation projects, and safety net programs designed to help struggling small and mid-sized family farmers and rural communities.

Bob Gronski, policy coordinator for the National Catholic Rural Life Conference [1] explained to me that Congress is poised to cut between $23 billion and $34 billion from current funding levels of the Farm Bill.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, helps feed more than 46 million low-income and no-income people in the United States. Gronski said the program is targeted for deep cuts in the U.S. House of Representatives' version of the Farm Bill.

International food assistance -- already just a very small portion of the Farm Bill -- is under assault. According to Catholics Confront Global Poverty [2], Congress is considering drastically cutting its funding to the "safe box," which currently provides only $450 million annually in aid to chronically hungry people overseas.

Gronski explained that the Farm Bill provides crop insurance and safety-net payment subsidies to commodity farmers who grow corn, soybeans, wheat, rice and cotton and dairy farmers to help protect them against adverse weather, low crop and milk prices, and rising seed, fertilizer and machinery costs.

But this system unfairly favors large farm operators who own thousands of acres -- the bigger the farm, the higher the subsidy. Smaller farmers, who often really need the help, get less of the subsidy pie, Gronski said.

The conservation segments of the Farm Bill are threatened by deep budget cuts as well.

The Conservation Stewardship Program, for instance, is a way to help farmers and ranchers practice soil and water conservation on their working lands. This is good for them because it helps cover costs to their operations, and it's good for the public because it helps protect our natural resources.

The NCRLC and Catholic Relief Services are asking us to email and phone (Capitol switchboard: 202-224-3121) our two U.S. senators and congressperson, urging them to fully support the following provisions for the 2012 Farm Bill:

- Reduce agricultural payments to farmers overall and close loopholes while targeting subsidies to small and moderately sized family farms;
- Fully fund conservation initiatives such as the Conservation Stewardship Program;
- Adequately fund and protect the PL 480 Title II foreign food assistance program and provide $450

million annually for the "safe box" fund to help chronically hungry people overseas;
- Sufficiently fund and oppose weakening the domestic Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP);
- Increase Title II funding and allow food to be purchased in or near countries in need.

St. Ambrose warned, "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. ... The world is given to all, and not only to the rich."

As we ask our heavenly Father to give us "our daily bread," let us keep in mind our moral obligation to do everything in our power to ensure that all people, everywhere, always have their daily bread.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist.]

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