

House panel's food aid cuts in farm bill called 'unjustified and wrong'

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WASHINGTON -- A proposed \$16 billion cut in the nation's Supplemental Nutritional and Assistance Program is "unjustified and wrong," said a joint letter from the chairman of the U.S. bishops' domestic and international justice committees, leaders of Catholic Relief Services and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

The cuts in SNAP, once known as food stamps, "will hurt hungry children, poor families, vulnerable seniors and struggling workers," said the July 10 letter, addressed to Rep. Frank Lucas, R-Okla., chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, and Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., the committee's ranking Democrat.

"At this time of economic hardship and continued high unemployment, the committee should protect essential programs that serve poor and hungry people. To cut programs that feed hungry people in the midst of economic turmoil is unjustified and wrong," the letter said.

"A just farm bill requires shared sacrifice by all but cannot rely on disproportionate cuts to essential services for hungry, poor and vulnerable people," it said.

The letter was signed by Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Bishop Richard E. Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, chairman of the USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace; Carolyn Woo, president of Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency; and James Ennis, executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

The letter critiqued the Agriculture Committee's Federal Agriculture Reform and Risk Management Act. The full committee met July 11 to consider the more than 100 amendments to the \$957 billion measure, and early July 12 passed the bill with a bipartisan vote of 35-11. House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio said no decision has been made on when the full House will consider it.

The Senate passed its version of the farm bill in late June; it contained only \$4 billion in SNAP cuts, which Senate Agriculture Committee members said could be achieved by rooting out waste, fraud and abuse.

Any differences between the House and Senate versions would have to be resolved by a joint House-Senate conference committee. Aug. 3 is the last day the House and Senate are scheduled to be in session before their five-week summer recess begins. The current farm bill expires Sept. 30.

The letter from Catholic leaders lauded the House Agriculture Committee's work on international food security and development, saying that it "wisely allocates" \$400 million annually for Food for Peace non-emergency programs to help combat the underlying causes of long-term hunger in the poorest countries.

And, while criticizing the SNAP cuts, the letter said an increase in Emergency Food Assistance Program funding "will help churches, charities and food pantries serve hungry people in our communities."

The letter said full funding for conservation and rural development programs "is essential to promote stewardship of creation and help rural communities thrive. The (Agriculture) Committee draft maintains funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, reauthorizes the Rural Micro-Entrepreneur Program and promotes broadband access in rural communities. However, we remain concerned that conservation and rural development programs continue to receive significant cuts."

It also called the proposal to eliminate direct payments in farm subsidies is "a positive step." Agriculture subsidies, the letter said, "should be reduced overall and crop insurance should be targeted to help small- and medium-sized farmers, especially minority-owned farms, over larger industrial agriculture."

Government resources, it added, "should help those who truly need assistance and support those who comply with environmentally sound and sustainable agriculture practices. Savings from reductions to agricultural subsidies should be used to support hunger and nutrition programs that feed poor and vulnerable people."

"The farm bill affects us all, but most significantly, those who are hungry, living in poverty, and those trying to maintain farming as a viable way of life," the letter said. "We join other Christian leaders in insisting 'a circle of protection' be drawn around essential programs that feed poor and vulnerable people, serve small and moderate-sized family farms, promote stewardship of creation and help rural communities both at home and abroad prosper."

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