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Nebraska religious leaders urge concern for poor in farm bill debate

by Catholic News Service

Omaha, Neb. — Cutting food aid for poor children to bring the federal deficit under control seems "penny-wise and pound-foolish," said an essay by four Nebraska Christian bishops, including the Catholic bishop of Grand Island, Bishop William Dendinger.

"We do not want to saddle our children with crushing debt," the bishops said in an essay published in the June 2 issue of the *Omaha World-Herald*. "However, votes to reduce the deficit for our children that have the unintended consequence of increasing their hunger and poverty seem penny-wise and pound-foolish."

The bishops urged Nebraska's two senators, Mike Johanns and Deb Fischer, both Republicans, to reject amendments to the farm bill that would cut funds to the federal Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps.

"Today, 18 percent of children in Nebraska live in poverty -- a 3 percent increase since 2009 -- and 95,500 families struggle to put food on the table," the bishops said. "During difficult economic times, families go to local church pantries and apply for assistance through SNAP."

The bishops alluded to the size of potential SNAP cuts as part of the overall farm bill being considered in June. "The Senate is considering \$4 billion in cuts over 10 years, while the House proposal would cut \$21 billion over 10 years, removing 2 million people from SNAP," they said.

The House version of the farm bill has been approved by the House Agriculture Committee and awaits action by the full House. Debate began on the Senate version Wednesday.

"During the recession, SNAP participation grew. This demonstrates its effectiveness as it quickly and

effectively responded to increased poverty and unemployment," the bishops added. "SNAP participation goes up and down with the economy. Participation is expected to go down as the economy recovers, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

"Yet it is SNAP's effectiveness that seems to have made it a target for some elected officials. While it might be tempting to eye SNAP's recent growth as a reason to cut funding, it would be shortsighted given our limited resources in the face of so much need."

In addition to Dendinger, other bishops signing the essay were Bishop Brian Maas of Nebraska Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Bishop J. Scott Barker of the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska; and Bishop Scott Jones of the Nebraska Conference of the United Methodist Church.

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