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Editorial: Farm Bill is an opportunity to turn a broken system around

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Horses and ponies run on a farm in 2009 just outside Postville, Iowa. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Every five years, Congress looks over the nation's agricultural, nutrition and food aid policies and passes a multibillion-dollar piece of legislation known as the Farm Bill. Since only a small number of Americans farm, the bill is shaped and debated without much media attention, yet it's an important piece of legislation because it provides food aid both here and abroad while forming and supporting our overall food and farming system.

The Senate Agriculture Committee has passed its version of the bill and it has gone to the Senate floor.

As it stands now, the Senate bill cuts support for domestic nutrition programs that feed the very poorest families, fails to provide an adequate safety net for farmers when prices drop low while costs remain high, and does little to alter the power dynamic of agribusiness over producers and consumers.

A key target for budget cutting in the bill is international food assistance. According to Catholics Confront Global Poverty, a task force set up by Catholic Relief Services, Congress is considering drastic cuts to the "safe box," which provides $450 million annually in aid to chronically hungry people overseas.

The current version inadequately protects farmers and consumers from monopoly control of the food system,

from the big meatpackers, processors and retailers that keep payments for farmers low and limit choices for food shoppers, according to Food and Water Watch, a Washington D.C.-based consumer advocacy group. An amendment proposed by Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) to ban meatpacker ownership of livestock was a step forward but it failed to make the committee's final vote. Funding remains low for local food systems, for organic farm programs, and for making broadband telecommunication services available in rural areas

Deep cuts threaten the conservation segments of the bill as well. The Conservation Stewardship Program, for example, is a way to help farmers and ranchers practice soil and water conservation, helping to cover costs for these operations. It benefits us all by protecting natural resources.

At this point, the bill is a work in progress. Last summer's budget control agreement triggered the proposed steep cuts in food assistance, conservation and other programs, and the "reconciliation budget" passed by the House on May 11 further supports those cuts. The Farm Bill debate will echo the wider debate in Congress that brews as legislators decide whether to substitute cuts in entitlements and poverty programs for defense budget cuts.

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Catholic Charities USA and Catholic Relief Services have joined forces this year to promote -- against the grain of the budget-cutting mood -- a more farmer-friendly and environmentally generous bill. They ask us to contact our senators and congresspersons, urging them to fully support the following provisions:

- 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 at least $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).

Due to years of bad food policy that has benefited agribusiness, big grain traders and the largest farms, the system has wreaked havoc on family farmers, on our public health and on rural communities. The 2012 Farm Bill is an opportunity to adequately provide for the hungry both here and abroad while turning that broken system around, supporting our small towns and rural areas in building a better future, reflecting the best American values and the essence of Catholic social teaching.

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