Talking about the Farm Bill

Background
The U.S. farm bill is comprehensive legislation that is renewed every five years and governs our nation’s farm, food, and conservation policies, including Food Stamps and food sent to starving people in other countries. The current farm bill expires this year, and thus must be reauthorized by Congress by the end of 2007.

The farm bill represents a broken promise to America’s farmers and rural communities. Originally devised in the 1930s to give farmers an economic “safety net” during difficult times, today’s farm bill gives out large government payments to a small number of farmers while doing little to help the majority of farmers and rural communities. Moreover, it actually hurts poor farmers in developing countries by encouraging U.S. farmers to overproduce certain crops like cotton and rice, creating a glut that drives down world prices.

Message for Members of Congress
Congress should use the 2007 farm bill to restructure the current misguided commodity-payment system to be more equitable for farmers both at home and around the world. This would allow Congress to redirect billions of dollars into programs that need it most: nutrition, rural development, and the research and development of renewable-energy sources.

Ask Your Member of Congress to Invest Money Saved from the Commodity Program in:

- **Rural development programs**, which give loans to farmers just getting started, minority and economically disadvantaged farmers, and which pay for key technological and infrastructural development in rural communities such as broadband internet.
- **Nutrition programs** that pay for Food Stamps for poor families. Rural Americans are more likely to live in poverty and, ironically, to rely on the Food-Stamp program than urban and suburban Americans.
- **Conservation programs** that help farmers reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water quality, and protect wildlife habitats; and
- **Programs to fund the research and development of renewable energy** that could lead to greater energy independence for the United States.

Freeing up commodity money could also:

Allow for desperately needed investments in U.S. food-aid programs (programs that provide food to countries facing emergencies around the world), and allow Congress to devise a new “safety net” for rural America that would be more equitable than the current system and not hurt poor farmers around the world.
FURTHER BACKGROUND

Why the Current Commodity-Payment System Should be Reformed

Currently, the U.S. spends an average of $12 billion per year on commodity payments, nearly all to the producers of five main crops (rice, wheat, corn, cotton, and soybeans). The current system is inequitable to farmers both at home and around the world.

The current system is not good for rural America:

- Approximately 75% of current U.S. commodity payments go to the largest 10% of producers.
- More than 75% of American farmers do not receive any commodity payments, while loopholes in the current law allow some of the largest farmers to collect payments in excess of $1 million.
- Commodity payments do not generate jobs for rural America. In fact, in counties that receive the most commodity payments, job gains have been below the national average.
- Moreover, rural Americans are more likely to live in poverty than those living in urban settings and are more likely to rely on the Food Stamp Program, which is currently under-funded as a result of money spent on the commodity-payment system.

The current system is also bad for poor farmers in other countries:

- Since the current commodity system pays American farmers by the acre and the bushel, it encourages them to grow more than the market can absorb. The largest operations overproduce crops such as cotton and rice, creating a glut that drives down world prices and undermines the livelihood of farmers in places like Africa.
- More than 75 million of the world’s poorest people – most of whom live on less than a dollar a day – rely on farming as their way to earn a living. American farm policy should not stack the system against them.
- Cotton production is particularly important to the livelihood of Sub-Saharan Africa. Twenty million Africans rely on cotton production for their living (as opposed to 25,000 cotton farmers in the U.S.).
- Despite significant promises made by U.S. leaders to fighting poverty in the world through debt relief, foreign aid, and fair trade practices – the cornerstones of the Millennium Development Goals – the U.S. currently spends more on domestic cotton subsidies alone than it does on the sum total of foreign aid and debt cancellation to Africa.

Why Churches Care About Farm Bill Reform

From God’s initial command to be good stewards of creation to the Prophets’ call for justice among governments and nations, people of faith in every age are called together to work for the common good. Inspired by Jesus’ command to care for poor and hungry people, we join together to support policies that promote economic justice, strengthen rural communities at home and around the world, care for the land as God’s creation, foster right relations among nations and achieve an end to hunger. Broad reform of U.S. food and farm policy, including adjustments to the commodity payment programs, is important to progress against hunger and poverty in this country and around the world.

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