

Religious groups band together to call for farm bill reforms

WASHINGTON - The U.S. bishops, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and Network, a Catholic social justice lobby, are joining more than a dozen other religious groups in advocating reforms in federal farm policy that could be implemented through the farm bill now working its way through Congress.

The organizations have coalesced into a body called the Religious Working Group on the Farm Bill to propose changes in the legislation that they say would benefit farmers, rural communities and Americans' nutritional needs.

"Passing a new farm bill is an important opportunity to reshape our agricultural policies to build a more just framework that better serves rural communities and vulnerable farmers in the U.S., overcomes hunger here and abroad, and helps poor farmers and their families in developing countries," said an April 20 statement by Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, N.Y. chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Policy.

"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," said the Religious Working Group on the Farm Bill statement, also issued April 20.

The working group outlined for consideration for the farm bill a broad agenda of issues that would:

- Increase investments that combat rural poverty and strengthen rural communities.

- Strengthen and expand programs that reduce hunger and improve nutrition in the United States.
- Strengthen and increase investment in policies that promote conservation and good stewardship of the land.
- Provide transitions for farmers to alternative forms of support that are more equitable and do not distort trade in ways that fuel hunger and poverty.
- Protect the health and safety of farmworkers.
- Expand research related to alternative, clean and renewable forms of energy.
- Improve and expand international food aid in ways that encourage local food security.

“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,” the Religious Working Group on the Farm Bill statement said.

“The current system should be changed in ways that would strengthen communities in rural America, ensure all Americans an adequate, nutritious diet, provide better and more targeted support for U.S. farm families of modest means, and conserve the land for present and future generations,” it said.

Changes like this in the 2007 farm bill - a reauthorization bill expected to set federal rural and nutrition policy for five or six years - are “necessary to unlock the ability of smallholder farmers in developing countries, who comprise the majority of the world’s hungry people, to improve their livelihoods and escape poverty,” the statement said.

House committee and subcommittee work on the farm bill was expected to start in early May, according to Robert Gronski, National Catholic Rural Life Conference policy coordinator.

“Farming ought to be regarded as a sacred calling to take care of the land and to bring forth the food and fiber that sustains the community. The time is now to advocate for a dramatic reform of U.S. agricultural policy so that rural communities in the United States and in the developing world can survive and prosper,” said the Rev. John L. McCullough, a Methodist minister who is executive director and CEO of Church World Service.

Joining the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as signers of the working group’s statement were Bread for the World, Church World Service, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the National Council of Churches, the Washington office of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ’s Justice and Witness Ministries, and the United Methodist Church’s General Board of Church and Society.

Joining CRS, Catholic Charities USA, Network and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference as endorsers of the statement were Lutheran World Relief, Oxfam America, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and Together For Hope: The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s Rural Poverty Initiative.