

WITNESS IN WASHINGTON WEEKLY

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Final Farm Bill, Really, Final this Time

Last week, both House and Senate voted overwhelmingly to approve a farm bill that the President has promised to veto, possibly as early as tomorrow. The two chambers of Congress voted with such strong margins in favor of this bill, that they will certainly be able to override the President's veto before the final one-week extension runs out this Friday.

When the PC(USA) joined with our ecumenical colleagues to call for reform of the 2007 farm bill nearly a year and a half ago, it was with high hopes, but on the whole, this bill is sadly full of missed opportunities and false choices, even though it does contain some significant improvements for nutrition and conservation programs. These improvements serve as a blind to cover up a bill that largely maintains the status quo of a farm payment system that benefits big agriculture, while leaving small and medium sized farmers behind. The fallacy of U.S. farm policy is that the U.S. must choose between aiding the poor in the U.S. and the protecting the poor around the world. Indeed, not only does this bill set up this false choice, but it exacerbates the plight of those who are living in poverty and hunger around the globe. Congress should have done better in this farm bill.

In October, 2007, Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick joined with ecumenical colleagues to urge that **“the U.S. Farm Bill should reflect our nation’s commitment to strong and vibrant farms and rural communities, an adequate and nutritious diet for all people, and an opportunity for everyone to benefit from the abundance of the land.”** Unfortunately, this final bill falls short on the commitment to vibrant farms and communities and to adequate and nutritious diets, even though it contains significant gains for nutrition.

What Is Wrong with the New Farm Bill:

No Commodity Payment Reform

- The final farm bill fails to impose meaningful payment limits or income requirements and to create an adequate safety net for farmers in the U.S.
- Rather, this bill continues a wasteful and bloated farm payment system that fuels inequity at home, concentrating land and wealth in the hands of a wealthy few.
- Further, this payment system distorts markets abroad, making it virtually impossible for farmers in developing nations to earn their living competing with U.S. commodity crops.
- The failure to adequately reform the commodity title of this Farm Bill demonstrates the undue influence of wealthy special interests and a lack of true concern for the farmers that represent the backbone of U.S. agriculture and people living in poverty throughout the world.

Inadequate International Food Aid

- The McGovern-Dole International Food-for-Education program provides meals to school children in the poorest countries around the world, and has been a proven tool in combating not only hunger, but is a proven tool in increasing attendance in schools, especially for girls.
- With dismay, we witnessed the writers of the final compromise bill slashing funding for the McGovern-Dole program from the House-passed \$840 million to a mere \$84 million. This funding cut is unconscionable in light of the current global food crisis.
- The PC(USA) also supported a provision to allow 25% of U.S. food aid to be purchased locally to crises rather than being shipped from the U.S., in order to allow more speedy aid and stimulation of local economies, but the final bill does not allow for this innovation, so U.S. food aid will continue to be shipped from the U.S.

What is Good in the New Farm Bill:

Gains for Domestic Nutrition

- Overall, the final bill contains \$10.364 billion in badly needed increases and updates for the nutrition programs in the U.S.
- In particular, the Food Stamp program will receive a boost of \$7.8 billion in benefit updates and overdue statutory changes;
- the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides food for food banks, receives a funding increase of \$1.6 billion
- and \$1 billion goes for a new fresh fruits and vegetables program for children already eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches.

Investments in Lands Conservation

- The final farm bill makes a net increased mandatory investment of \$4 billion in conservation programs, with a focus on programs that encourage farmers and ranchers to employ good environmental practices on working lands, that is, lands that are currently in production, growing crops or other activities.

Regional Agriculture and New Farmers Support

- For the first time, farmers' markets will receive mandatory funding support from the federal government. Markets will receive \$33 million over four years.
- The final bill includes several programs that are intended to encourage and support new farmers and ranchers.
- The bill contains certification assistance, conversion assistance, research, data collection and crop insurance to help farmers transition to organic crop production.
- The final bill contains a newly-created Livestock Title to begin to provide fairness and contract reform for farmers in livestock and poultry markets. Unfortunately, the final compromise did not include improving amendments from the Senate bill.

Overall, this bill includes many good provisions, but at its core, it presents a false choice – pitting those living in poverty in the U.S. against those living in poverty around the world. For the last year and a half, the PC(USA) has urged for reform in the 2007 reauthorization of the farm bill. Instead of reform, however, the final bill continues a bloated and wasteful commodity payment system that fails to support farmers at home in the U.S. and distorts the global market, harming farmers everywhere else. In a time when the media reports daily food riots and we are aware of what many call a pending “global food crisis,” we cannot afford to continue our wasteful system of market distortion and price suppression.

In the end, while the gains for nutrition and conservation are pleasing, they are very small gains when compared to the magnitude of the loss in the fight for commodity payment reform.

General Assembly Guidance:

In a 1985 statement, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly wrote “we believe it is the responsibility and duty of the Federal government to enact a comprehensive, long-term food and fiber policy, with specific price, production and conservation goals designed to protect and enhance family-farm agriculture in the United States ... We believe further that this nation must establish a strong system of sustainable agriculture and prevent the continuing concentration of land in the hands of a smaller and smaller number of owners” (*Minutes*, 1985, p. 399).

Further, in 2002 the 214th General Assembly approved “We Are What We Eat: Recommendations and Report,” which “direct[ed] the Presbyterian Washington Office to continue its advocacy and education in areas of public policy regarding hunger concerns related to economic and food production issues, alert Presbyterians about upcoming public policy related to the agricultural revolution and food production/consumption, [and] encourage members of the PC(USA) to contact legislators urging support of the family farmer/ranchers, farm and processing plant workers, and equitable world trade policy” (*Minutes*, 2002, p.535).