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Catholic leaders support Senate Farm Bill

by Brian Roewe

Eco Catholic

Catholic leaders: Farm bill can help hungry, farmers, rural US

By Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Five U.S. Catholic clergy and lay leaders said they want to work with lawmakers for a new farm bill that "provides for poor and hungry people both at home and abroad, offers effective support for those who grow our food, ensures fairness to family farmers and ranchers, and promotes stewardship of the land."

"The farm bill affects us all, but most significantly, those who are hungry, living in poverty and struggling to keep farming a viable way of life," they said in a March 6 letter to key members of a Senate committee that works on agricultural issues.

The farm bill is a reauthorization package that generally comes up for renewal every five or six years.

"The 2012 Farm Bill is an opportunity to address our nation's broken and outdated agricultural policies. This is a crucial time to build a more just framework that puts poor and hungry people first, serves small and moderate-sized family farms, promotes sustainable stewardship of the land and helps vulnerable farmers and rural communities both at home and in developing countries," the letter said.

The letter was signed by Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Bishop Richard E. Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, chairman of the bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace; Fr. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA; Carolyn Woo, president of Catholic Relief Services; and James F. Ennis, executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

It was addressed to Sens. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., and Pat Roberts, R-Kan., chairwoman and ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry.

The Catholic leaders targeted domestic hunger and nutrition, international food security and development, conservation, subsidies and rural development in their letter.

In an era of budget constraints, "government resources (subsidies) should assist those who truly need assistance and support those who comply with environmentally sound and sustainable farming practices," they said. "We also call for a careful consideration of the economics and ethics of subsidizing food to produce fuel."

On domestic hunger and nutrition issues, "we call on you to support access to adequate and nutritious food for those in need and to oppose attempts to weaken or restructure these programs that would result in reduced benefits to hungry people," they said. They specifically called for adequate funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, and the Emergency Food Assistance Program.

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"We support full funding for conservation initiatives that promote stewardship of the land and environmentally sound agriculture practices," they said, singling out the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and easement programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program and the Grassland Reserve Program for support.

International food assistance, the letter said, should "combat chronic hunger, build resilience against drought and other natural disasters and provide adequate nutrition for poor families."

Rural communities and small towns, the Catholic leaders said, are "the backbone of the social and economic life of America. Effective policies and programs are needed to encourage rural development and promote the culture and well-being of these communities." Help, they added, should be funneled to beginning, socially disadvantaged, small and mid-sized farmers and ranchers, as well as access to broadband telecommunications services and entrepreneurial assistance initiatives.

The National Farmers Union signaled its farm bill priorities March 6 during its convention in La Vista, Neb. "Agriculture is a primary driver of our rural and national economy, providing employment for one in 12 Americans, and is a job-creating industry based upon sustained production by approximately 2.2 million family farmers and ranchers," a convention proclamation said. "The next farm bill must be written to serve the needs of farmers and ranchers in times of need so that agriculture can continue to be a job-creating industry for all of America."

Stabenow and Roberts had outlined a farm bill last year during the "supercommittee" deficit reduction talks, but it fell through when the supercommittee could not reach agreement.

National Journal Daily, a Capitol Hill newsletter, reported March 5 that reaching agreement on a farm bill this year could be tough but is still doable. It noted that the Commodity Classic -- the joint meeting of the National Corn Growers Association, the American Soybean Association, the National Association of Wheat Growers and the National Sorghum Producers -- OK'd a resolution when it met in Nashville,

Tenn., calling for a new farm bill "to provide the level of certainty in America that a short-term extension cannot."

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