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Farm bill faces delays; its constituencies face economic uncertainty

by Mark Pattison by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- The 2007 farm bill is now the 2008 farm bill. And if something doesn't happen in Congress by April 18, it could very well become the 2009 farm bill.

There are many constituencies interested in different provisions of the five-year, \$286 billion-plus farm bill currently facing revisions by a House-Senate conference committee.

Catholic rural life advocates want to see limits placed on the size of federal commodities payments. The biggest payments now go to the largest farms.

Catholic anti-poverty advocates would like to see gains made in federal food stamp and nutrition funding.

While the farm bill is being massaged into a version that Congress can stomach and President George W. Bush will sign, federal food stamp payouts will continue at current levels, about \$1 per person per meal. Those payouts have stubbornly stayed at \$1 per meal for nearly 30 years, according to Candy Hill, senior vice president of social policy and government affairs for Catholic Charities USA.

Farmworker advocates want to improve safety and health conditions for the workers -- largely migrants hailing from other countries -- who pick the crops that make it in some form or other to our tables.

But for the time being, spending bills like the farm bill are hemmed in by Congress' acceptance of a pay-as-you-go method of federal funding, reduced in Washington-speak to the less than elegant term "paygo." This means that funding for a new project, or increased funding for a current project, will have to come from another existing project. Military spending is the exception.

"While it's a very smart policy for the budget, it does make life very difficult when you find new items to budget," said Monica Mills, director of government relations for Bread for the World, the Christian citizens anti-hunger lobby.

Another potential sticking point is the insistence by some senators that the farm bill include a funding mechanism for permanent disaster relief.

Their argument, according to Bob Gronski, a public policy analyst for the National Catholic Rural Life Conference in Des Moines, Iowa, is that "in some part of the country, somewhere, some farmer or rancher has suffered some disaster -- drought, flooding." Another way to frame the argument is, as Gronski put it, "we'll worry about a disaster when it happens."

The disaster provision is in the Senate version of the farm bill, but not in the House version.

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But, said Virginia Nesmith, executive director of the National Farm Worker Ministry in St. Louis, "there's (disaster) relief for the growers but not for the farmworkers."

Will Congress pass the bill and send it to the president by April 18? It has blown other deadlines, the most recent being March 15.

"The White House has said if you can't figure it out by then ... we're just going to postpone it and wait for another year, and let a new president worry about it," Gronski said.

The U.S. bishops' position, as outlined in their 2003 statement "For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers," is that "the primary goals of agricultural policies should be providing food for all people and reducing poverty among farmers and farmworkers in this country and abroad."

To that end, the bishops want to cap agricultural subsidies at \$250,000 per farming operation, targeting agricultural subsidies, as they said, "to those who need them most and not those who need them least."

They want to address hunger abroad, setting aside \$600 million in resources for those suffering from chronic hunger -- a feature now only in the Senate version -- and ensuring that a \$25 million pilot program is authorized for the purchase of food locally.

In the differing versions of the farm bill, not every good thing is only in the Senate version. "There's some half-decent pesticide-related stuff that ended up in the House version of the bill," Nesmith said. This would help farmworkers, who are exposed daily for long hours to pesticides sprayed or crop-dusted onto fields.

On the domestic hunger front, the bishops want to see budget increases for food stamps and emergency food assistance.

Catholic Charities' Hill said food stamp allocations need to be reworked to index eligibility to inflation, and to allow food stamp recipients to build up assets while continuing to receive food stamps.

"You never get ahead!" she exclaimed. While American society encourages the accumulation of wealth,

Hill said, "if you're a poor person you get penalized for it" -- even to the point of deciding between getting food stamps or having a car if the value of the auto exceeds federal asset limits.

One more fix Hill is pushing for would raise food stamp benefits for seniors from \$10 a month, which she called "abominable. ... Ten dollars doesn't get you much at the store anymore. ... If we got these fixes we wouldn't have to go through this fight every time."

Gronski wants Congress to act soon, because its inaction is causing anxiety in rural America. "The farmers are already making their plans for the spring," he said. "The farmers just need to know what they're going to get."

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