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Key bishop asks Congress to protect nutrition aid

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A key U.S. bishop has written Congress, asking representatives to preserve funding for federal nutritional assistance in any deliberations over a new farm bill.

Wednesday's letter from Stockton, Calif., Bishop Stephen Blaire, chairman of the U.S. bishops' committee on domestic justice and human development, comes as analysts are speculating whether Congress will take up the measure again this year.

The last attempt to pass a farm bill, a wide-ranging measure dealing with many issues of the nation's agricultural policy, failed in June after many Republicans in the House of Representatives pulled support, saying the proposed bill didn't cut nutritional assistance programs enough.

Blaire writes Wednesday that they shouldn't consider those cuts again because they have "profound human and moral consequences."

"The House must prevent cuts and harmful structural changes to nutrition programs ... that will harm hungry children, poor families, vulnerable seniors and workers who are underemployed or unable to find employment," Blaire writes in his letter, which was sent on U.S. bishops' conference letterhead to each representative.

"How the House addresses these concerns has profound human and moral consequences," he continues. "Adequate and nutritious food is a basic need and a fundamental human right that is integral to protecting the life and dignity of the human person."

Last June's proposed farm bill was estimated to cost some \$940 billion over ten years, with some \$743 billion of that going to nutrition assistance programs. Other allocations included about \$93 billion for crop

insurance, \$40.1 billion to shield farmers from market swings, and \$56.7 billion towards conservation efforts.

A few members of Congress have now proposed splitting the nutrition assistance funding from the rest of the farm bill. It is estimated that that funding, largely handled by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, assisted 3.9 million Americans in 2011.

"Comprehensive legislation such as the Farm Bill invariably involves compromise but this compromise cannot come at the expense of poor and hungry people," writes Blaire.

"This is a crucial time to build a more just framework that puts poor and hungry people first," he continues.

"I respectfully urge you to reject efforts to reduce or restructure SNAP and pursue the common good in agriculture and food policy that works from a genuine preferential option for the poor."

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