

## At the policy table: Religion and the US Farm Bill *by Robert D. Francis*

WHILE MORE AND MORE PEOPLE are taking an interest in farmers' markets and locally produced food, far fewer are looking at the government policies that do so much to shape the overall food system. One of the most influential such policies in the world is the US Farm Bill. This bill, which targets \$80-100 billion worth of annual spending, has significant consequences for farmers and consumers both in the US and abroad.

Legislators originally crafted the Farm Bill during the 1930s Dust Bowl to protect and support American farmers, who made up 20 percent of the population. The bill, which is renewed about every five years, has since evolved into a 1300-page piece of legislation that covers a wide range of policy areas. The most recent version expires this year, and its renewal has been the subject of ongoing debate.

The bill covers programs for rural development, bio-fuels, conservation, as well as America's largest nutrition and anti-hunger program, Food Stamps. But the most contentious piece of the bill is the commodity section, which establishes subsidies focused on five major crops: wheat, feed grain (mostly corn), cotton, rice and soybeans. For the Religious Working Group on the Farm Bill – which includes roughly 15 denominational offices and faith-based organizations – these subsidies are a point of concern.

One issue is that the subsidies directly undermine farmers and poor people in developing countries, where three-quarters of the population typically relies on farming for their livelihood. "After the 2002 Farm Bill went into effect, we started hearing from church leaders in Africa that it was causing problems for many poor and hungry families in their countries," said Rev. David Beckmann, president of the Christian anti-hunger group Bread for the World, in testimony to a Senate committee. US crop subsidies distort global markets, depressing commodity prices and making it hard for farmers in places like Africa to compete.

To illustrate the concept: a farmer in the US and a farmer in a developing country each need to sell their wheat for a certain price per bushel in order to make a living. If the US farmer is getting a government subsidy, he can sell his grain for less than market value, thus undercutting others. Moreover, because the subsidy system pays the farmer per bushel, it encourages him to overproduce. That's good for him, and possibly for the consumer, but if large quantities of that surplus lower-priced wheat are dumped into a developing country, unsubsidized farmers there are forced to

sell at a loss. Millions of farmers worldwide have come to understand this dynamic all too clearly.

After realizing the negative international consequences of the Farm Bill, Bread for the World spent four years studying the legislation and, according to Rev. Beckmann, "came to the conclusion that the current Farm Bill is not working very well for farm and rural families of modest means in our country either." Bread for the World, and the other members of The Religious Working Group on the Farm Bill, are addressing both foreign and domestic issues.

Within the US, the subsidies favor large producers. In 2004, more than half of the \$9.9 billion in farm subsidy payments were given to the wealthiest seven percent of American farmers. A further concern is that subsidies ultimately end up in the hands of the large companies that sell seed, fertilizer and chemicals to farmers. As subsidies rise, these companies simply charge farmers more for inputs.

"It doesn't seem fair to me that our Farm Bill is biased in favor of big farms," said Beckmann.

The Religious Working Group is engaging its constituents and working the halls of Congress in hopes that the new bill will not just be more of the same. Even though folks in church pews may have never heard of the Farm Bill, many Christian denominations and national groups have made the 2007 Farm Bill a matter of primary importance in their advocacy work. Jim Wallis of Sojourners/Call to Renewal, another Working Group

member, says, "Reform of the Farm Bill to reflect our best Christian values of justice and fairness is a moral issue and literally a matter of survival for some of the world's neediest people."

Specifically, the group is calling for the redirection of cash payments to the smaller farmers who need them most, the reduction of trade-distorting subsidies, and the redirection of some of the subsidy money to nutrition, conservation and rural development programs in the bill.

At the time of writing, it remains to be seen if the latest installment of the Farm Bill will contain any true reform. Thus far, forces intent on the status quo seem to have the upper hand, but the faith community continues to carry the mantle of just reform.

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