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CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE



June 10, 2024

The Honorable Martin Heinrich, Chair
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Hoeven, Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Heinrich and Ranking Member Hoeven:

We write on behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development and Committee on International Justice and Peace, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Rural Life, and the U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The respective Catholic organizations we represent work with Congress each year on a range of our priorities, including supporting the poor and vulnerable, protecting migrants and refugees, and protecting the preborn. Here, we wish to address the moral and human dimensions of the FY 2025 Agriculture Appropriations legislation.

Food insecurity is on the rise around the world, including in the United States where 12.8% of households reported difficulty providing food for their families over the course of the year and 3.3 million households reported they were not able to provide adequate, nutritious food for their children at some point during the year.¹ While grocery prices are leveling off, they remain significantly higher than several years ago.² It is hard to make ends meet and families need help. In his World Food Day Message, Pope Francis reminds us that the inaccessibility of food and basic resources “represents an affront to [people’s] intrinsic, God-given dignity” and calls on everyone to mobilize to fix it.³ Nutrition programs that support the basic right to food should be strengthened. We must work to ensure every person has enough nutritious food to sustain a life with dignity, promote good stewardship of the land and natural resources, and provide support to struggling farmers, ranchers, and farm workers.

Protecting the critical programs listed below is imperative. We urge Congress to increase funding for these programs to help families and service providers cope with rising costs. At a minimum, we urge maintaining FY 2024 funding levels for these programs and ensuring WIC is fully funded.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): Vulnerable moms, infants, and young children receive healthy food and nutrition support through WIC. This support is vital and must be maintained for all families in need. We are grateful for Congress’s efforts to ensure full funding of the WIC nutrition program in FY 2024 in light of rising food costs and increased program participation. Again, we implore Congress to fully fund WIC at no less than the same level of FY 2024 (factoring in projected inflation and WIC’s growing caseload) so that all eligible families who apply for WIC will receive access to life-saving nutrition and health services. Program operations must be able to respond adequately to changes in the economy and rising

¹ Rabbitt, M.P., Hales, L.J., Burke, M.P., & Coleman-Jensen, A. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Household food security in the United States in 2022* (October 2023). <https://doi.org/10.32747/2023.8134351.ers>

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: Food at Home in U.S. City Average”, retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (May 1, 2024). <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CUSR0000SAF11>

³ Pope Francis, Message for World Food Day (Oct 16, 2023).

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/food/documents/20231016-messaggio-giornata-alimentazione.html>

caseloads and food costs. The recent science-based updates to the WIC food program will help families receive proper nutrition and introduce nutrient-dense foods to their diet. Please protect these improvements and continue Congress's long history of bipartisan support for WIC.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): More than 42 million Americans relied on SNAP for basic nutrition in 2023 and the program lifted 3.7 million out of poverty the year before. SNAP is responsive to increased and decreased periods of need and continues to have one of the lowest fraud rates for federal programs. We ask Congress to ensure adequate funds for SNAP and to provide additional funding for state education and training programs, including case management, to help low-income families find work and self-sufficiency. SNAP should be strengthened through updates to calculations that account for rising food prices, improvement to the standard medical deduction, elimination of the cap on the Excess Shelter Deduction, and increased benefits for households with young children. State flexibility around waiving or scaling back work requirements should be preserved given present and future economic uncertainties. Access should also be improved for students, military families, lawfully present immigrants and refugees, and seniors. Formerly incarcerated individuals should be able to access SNAP. All U.S. territories should participate in SNAP and be brought into parity with the states. We applaud the inclusion of provisions that restore SNAP benefits for eligible individuals with drug felony convictions and transition Puerto Rico to full SNAP funding in the most recent Senate Agriculture Committee's majority Farm Bill proposal.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP): The TEFAP program is the backstop for food security in communities across the country, providing roughly 20% of food distributed by local hunger-relief organizations. We urge Congress to strengthen the program through additional funding, allowing the Department of Agriculture to retain the authority to purchase bonus commodities in times of high need and low prices, increasing support for the **Farm to Food Bank program** without the state match requirement, investing in infrastructure for refrigeration and distribution of fresh produce, and supporting policies to make food donation easier.

Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP): Faith communities and other charities are essential in providing food packages to hungry seniors in their local communities. Please maintain full funding for CSFP to help ensure adequate food assistance is provided to the growing population of low-income seniors.

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP): For over 50 years, CACFP has supplemented the diets of vulnerable Americans by providing nutritious meals and snacks. We ask Congress to increase funding for CACFP to continue supporting the health and wellness of the over 4 million Americans served by this program.

Access to Nutritious Food: More communities have access to locally grown food thanks to the **Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP)**. The program also helps underserved farmers and ranchers start new farm and food-related businesses to increase rural economic opportunity and help rural communities thrive. Please maintain 2018 Farm Bill mandatory funding adjusted to inflation for LAMP to expand access to local fresh and nutritious food. We also ask Congress to provide funding to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables through programs such as the **Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Incentive Programs** and the **Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP)**.

Conservation: The Catholic Church urges an integral ecology which recognizes a "certain reciprocity: as we care for creation, we realize that God, through creation, cares for us."⁴ Programs that focus on stewardship of working and retired lands and easements and partnerships, such as the **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)**, **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**, **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)**, and **Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)**, should receive support. We urge Congress to provide

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace (Jan 1, 2010). https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliiii-world-day-peace.html

adequate funding for the **Conservation Stewardship Program** to help underserved farmers and ranchers better conserve and care for farmland for future generations. Strong conservation programs are essential to enhancing natural resources and environmental protection and provide needed support to family farms. Conservation programs should include solutions to address carbon capture, climate mitigation, adaptation, food waste and ensuring access for all these programs to applicants who experienced historic disparities and discrimination, especially Black farmers.

Subsidies: It is important to continue support for **commodity and dairy farms**, as well as **specialty crops**, to encourage diversified production. Protecting against cuts to the USDA that would impact its ability to place staff in rural communities to help farmers diversify crops, get access to new markets, and receive assistance on technical issues is imperative. Given federal budget constraints, agricultural subsidies and direct payments must be targeted to **small and moderate-sized farms**, especially those of **Black farmers** and other historically marginalized groups, and payment limits must be enforced.

International Food Assistance and Development: US funding for international food assistance programs saves lives, reduces extreme poverty, and supports U.S. interests. 783 million people are hungry globally, and the 2024 Global Report on Food Crises reported that nearly 282 million people experienced high levels of acute hunger over the last year - a worldwide increase of 24 million. This rise was due in part to a sharp deterioration in food security, especially in the Gaza Strip and the Sudan. Given the projected needs, we ask Congress to increase funding to Food for Peace Title II and the McGovern-Dole Food for Education Program:

- **Food for Peace Title II:** Food for Peace emergency programs continue to serve as a critical lifeline for communities and the complementary non-emergency programs provide holistic, multisectoral support during the late stages of recovery to address the root causes of hunger and help communities move out of poverty. Additionally, Food for Peace non-emergency funding supports the Farmer-to-Farmer program, matching U.S. farming volunteers and agriculture experts with development programs overseas. Taking into consideration increasing global needs, we ask that Congress support no less than \$1.8 billion for Food for Peace Title II in the FY2025 appropriations with clear direction that at least \$365 million be used for nonemergency programs, including \$350 million for Resilience Food Securities Activities and \$15 million for Farmer-to-Farmer.
- **McGovern-Dole International Food for Education Program:** Globally CRS' McGovern-Dole projects provide over 950,000 children with a daily school meal, and in our work we have seen this program improve maternal and child nutrition outcomes, promote childhood literacy, support local farmers and markets, and help transition at-risk schools to a sustainable homegrown school feeding model. We ask Congress to provide \$265 million for the McGovern-Dole program.

Rural Housing: USDA's rural housing programs help support rural residents and agricultural workers. We ask Congress to preserve affordable rural rental housing through adequate funding for **Section 514 and 515 programs** and the **Multifamily Preservation and Revitalization Demonstration**. Ensure that sufficient **rental assistance** and **rural housing vouchers** are available to keep these units affordable to rural workers and families.

A just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor and other vulnerable persons. It requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.⁵

Finally, any work that aims at ensuring justice and the means of flourishing for every human being cannot be separated from the protection and wellbeing of women and preborn children. To that end, we strongly encourage Congress, in the appropriations process, to protect the dignity and sanctity of human life in all conditions and stages.

⁵ USCCB, CCUSA, and CRS Letter to Congress on the Debt limit, May 17, 2023. <https://www.usccb.org/resources/usccb-ccusa-and-crs-letter-congress-debt-limit-may-17-2023>

We especially urge Congress to prevent and prohibit policies that facilitate and promote access to chemical abortion through the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Mothers in need and their families deserve authentic support.

Thank you for your consideration and efforts to protect and fund programs that support families, feed hungry people, help the most vulnerable farmers and farmworkers, strengthen rural communities, and promote good stewardship of God's creation. We look forward to working with you as budgetary appropriations are shaped.

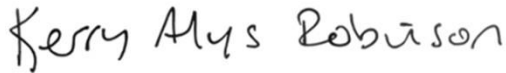
Sincerely yours,



Most Reverend Borys Gudziak
Archbishop of Ukrainian Catholic
Archeparchy of Philadelphia
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



Most Reverend A. Elias Zaidan
Bishop of Maronite Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



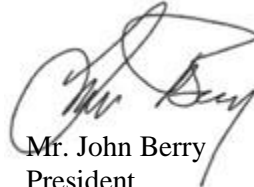
Ms. Kerry Alys Robinson
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Mr. Sean Callahan
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Mr. John Berry
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