

Farm Bill 101

Catholic viewpoints on a government program

By Kara Storey

Last April, a major blizzard hit North Dakota just as calving season had begun. Ranchers across the state lost a significant amount of cattle, which also meant their livelihoods took a significant hit.

“I heard stories of people who lost 60 calves last year,” said Matt Perdue, 30, Government Relations Director at North Dakota Farmers Union. “That’s a huge blow to a rancher’s herd.”

Thankfully, the Livestock Indemnity Program, a part of the 2018 Farm Bill, was able to step in to help ranchers regrow their herds and recover some of those losses, he said. It’s one of many programs in the Farm Bill that help support American agriculture.

“The Farm Bill is a kind of major farm safety net program for farmers and ranchers across the country,” Perdue said. “It’s also a major land conservation bill and a major supporter of programs that help feed hungry people across the country.”

With the Farm Bill set to expire at the end of September, U.S. lawmakers are currently drafting a new five-year Farm Bill to be voted on later this year. Since the 1930s, Congress has enacted 18 Farm Bills to address the nation’s food and agricultural issues.

“The big, unwritten rule in Washington, D.C., is that you never open up the Farm Bill outside of a Farm Bill cycle,” Perdue said. “But every five years, we do this pretty significant review and rewrite a lot of these key programs.”

There would be significant consequences across the food chain without the Farm Bill, he added.

“The Farm Bill programs, whether they’re programs to get food into the hands of hungry people or they are programs to support family farmers, all contribute to



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providing an abundant, affordable food supply for our country,” Perdue said. “I think if we didn’t have the Farm Bill, you would certainly see food costs go up for all Americans. I think you would also see a significant decline in family farm and ranch agriculture.”

In the current bill, just over three-quarters of funding is devoted to nutrition in the form of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Another 9% is set aside for crop insurance, and 7% each goes to commodities and conservation. The remaining 1% funds programs in horticulture, forestry, and rural development, among other things.

For farmers and ranchers, the safety net programs are essential for them to survive and thrive on their land, Perdue said.

“At the end of the day, farming is a really risky occupation,” he said. “You have weather volatility, you have market volatility, and you have this really diverse array of producers across the country who really don’t have a lot of control over what the markets will do in

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. . ."

- Matthew 25:35

any given year. So the farm safety net is really critical to making sure that family farms and ranches can continue to survive and stay afloat when there are severe market downturns, when there are natural disasters. When we look at improving Farm Bill programs, it's always through the lens of: How do we ensure family farmers and ranchers have the tools they need to make it through tough times?"

Lochiel Edwards, 69, a wheat grower from Big Sandy, Montana, has experienced firsthand the relief the Farm Bill can offer. He said the last two years have produced dismal crops, but the bill's crop insurance aspect has provided him a buffer.

"Crop insurance kind of provides a little floor under you to make sure that you can buy the fertilizer, seed and equipment that you need to farm again the next year," Edwards said. "I think that the most-loved part of the Farm Bill that's held in highest esteem by farmers is the crop insurance title. Desperate farmers don't do as well at taking care of the land and taking care of hungry people if they don't have the resources to do so."

So far, observers of the Farm Bill debate haven't noticed many differences between the 2018 and 2023 versions, said Edwards, who spoke at a February Farm Bill hearing in his home state of Montana. Currently, the only changes Edwards has noticed is an effort to include some climate change initiatives and incentives for farmers to address carbon sequestration in the soil, he said.

Eyes of faith

In 2003, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released the document "For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food," in which they stated 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." While the Farm Bill might seem like just another piece of legislation that sets policies for commodity production, Catholic leaders have taken strong interest in promoting programs that align with Catholic principles. According to the USCCB's website, the bishops, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Rural Life have worked together to promote Farm Bill pro-

grams "that support rural communities and family farms; strengthen and expand domestic anti-hunger programs; promote conservation and good stewardship of the land; ensure safe living and working conditions for farmworkers; promote fairness for farmers in developing countries; and provide food security aid efficiently and effectively to hungry people worldwide."

For Edwards, Catholic support of the Farm Bill centers around the fact that it helps stabilize rural communities and keeps them healthy. He added that people of faith should also be concerned about ensuring that American farmers can grow, ship and sell extra food to hungry countries around the world.

"When people call their congressman about the Farm Bill, they need to make sure that they've got in mind that this bill needs to be structured in a way that makes sure that it is not cutting production and distorting the trade of grain around the world," Edwards said. "It's that production that causes the surplus that allows us to ship food to hungry countries. As a Catholic, I believe that it is our contribution to the world to have affordable commodities on the food side."

Perdue urges Catholics to stay engaged with the Farm Bill process by doing everything from contacting their members of Congress about the importance of policies that assist family farmers and ranchers to chatting with fellow parishioners about the importance of this legislation. Everyone eats, he said, and therefore the bill is important to everyone. But even more so, there's a special relationship that agricultural workers have with creation

"There is something unique about farming and ranching," Perdue said. "It's a calling. It's more than just an economic activity. From that perspective, the Farm Bill protects that unique connection that farmers and ranchers have with the land, with the animals that they care for. Really caring for God's creation and producing food for the world is critically important, and to the extent that the Farm Bill keeps family farmers and ranchers on the land and preserves that connection, I think the bill is critically important."