



March 19, 2015

The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski, Vice-Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Cochran and Vice-Chairwoman Mikulski:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development and International Justice and Peace, Catholic Charities USA and Catholic Relief Services, we wish to address the moral and human dimensions of FY 2016 Agriculture Appropriations. We urge you to resist cuts to both domestic and international food aid, as well as conservation and rural development programs. Reductions will hurt hungry, poor and vulnerable people in our nation and those around the world who often struggle to survive.

In *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food*, the U.S. bishops wrote, "The primary goals of agricultural policies should be providing food for all people and reducing poverty among farmers and farm workers in this country and abroad." Adequate nutrition is essential to protect human life and dignity. We must also promote good stewardship of the land and natural resources. In our soup kitchens and parish food pantries, we see the faces of poor and hungry people every day. As a faith community, we feed those without work, pregnant women and children, and seniors on limited incomes.

We acknowledge the difficult challenges Congress and the Administration face to match scarce resources with real needs. But a just spending bill cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor and vulnerable persons; it requires shared sacrifice by all.

As pastors and teachers, we believe these are economic, political and moral choices with human consequences. Our bishops' conference has repeatedly offered several moral criteria to help guide difficult budgetary decisions:

1. Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity.
2. A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects "the least of these" (Matthew 25). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty, should come first.
3. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times.

With more than 49 million Americans (1 in 6) living in food insecure households, our nation must prioritize programs that assist poor and hungry people and promote good stewardship which include:

WIC: Fund the Women, Infants, and Children nutrition program at **\$6.68 billion** to respond to economic conditions and meet anticipated needs. With record high child poverty (1 in 3 children), a cut to this program would harm some of the most vulnerable low-income women, infants, and children in our country.

TEFAP: Provide **full funding levels as required by the 2014 Farm Bill** for The Emergency Food Assistance Program and food and distribution grants in local communities. Cuts to the program could force some of our parishes and other charities and food pantries to turn away hungry people when they continue to need our help.

CSFP: Fund The Commodity Supplemental Food Program at **\$221 million** to ensure food assistance is provided to low-income seniors. Faith communities and other charities are essential in providing food packages to hungry seniors in their local communities. Reductions will result in a loss of food for thousands of low-income seniors.

CSP: Provide adequate funding for the Conservation Stewardship Program to help farmers better conserve and care for farm land for future generations. Strong conservation programs are necessary to promote good stewardship of creation and provide needed support to family farms.

VAPG: Maintain current funding for the Value Added Producer Grants program to help farmers and ranchers develop new farm and food-related businesses to increase rural economic opportunity and help farm and ranch families thrive.

With an estimated 805 million people chronically undernourished (UN-FAO) globally, our nation must support:

International Food Assistance: The Administration has proposed funding Food for Peace at \$1.4 billion, McGovern-Dole Food for Education at \$192 million, and Local and Regional Procurement (LRP) at \$20 million. We believe these levels are inadequate to address the needs. We are particularly concerned about the Food for Peace level which had to be supplemented last year with a drawdown of the Emerson Trust Fund. We are also troubled by the continuing impacts of the elimination of cargo preference reimbursements on all food aid programs. We recommend funding Food for Peace at \$1.55 billion, McGovern-Dole at \$200 million, and the LRP at \$80 million.

Developmental Food Aid: Congress must protect and direct an adequate amount of Food for Peace funding to development (referred to in the 2014 Farm Bill as “non-emergency”) programs. These programs build resilience, strengthen agricultural capacity, and improve livelihoods of the most vulnerable, thereby reducing the need to provide future emergency assistance. The Administration’s request directs \$270 million of Food for Peace funding to these programs, and proposes an additional \$80 million from the Development Assistance account for a total of \$350 million. We believe development should be a priority and recommend that Congress direct \$425 million of Food for Peace resources to development programs.

Reforms to Food Aid System: Congress should improve the efficiency and reach of food aid programming by reforming cargo preference rules. Current law requires that 50% of program food be carried on U.S. cargo vessels, but questionable implementation of the law has forced food aid programs to ship much more than 50% on U.S. vessels, which are on average three times more expensive. This reduces the number of people who could be helped by food aid programs. Congress should also provide Food for Peace authority to use some of its funds for local and regional procurement when this is best suited to the needs of beneficiaries or is clearly more efficient than using in-kind food.

Beyond domestic and international food aid, the U.S. Bishops’ Conference supports important farm safety net programs such as crop insurance and disaster assistance targeted to the needs of small to medium sized farmers and ranchers. But Congress should limit subsidies to these farms rather than supporting larger, wealthier producers, and use resulting savings to fund and maintain hunger and nutrition programs that serve hungry and vulnerable people.

At a time of budgetary constraints and great competition for agricultural resources, the needs of those who are hungry, poor and vulnerable should come before assistance to those who are relatively well off. With other Christian leaders, we urge the committee to draw a “circle of protection” around programs that serve those in greatest need and to put their needs first. We urge you to protect and fund programs that feed hungry people, help the most vulnerable farmers, strengthen rural communities and promote good stewardship of God’s creation.

Sincerely yours,



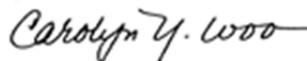
Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski
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Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
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Sr. Donna Markham, OP, Ph.D.
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