



Background Paper

BREAD FOR THE WORLD

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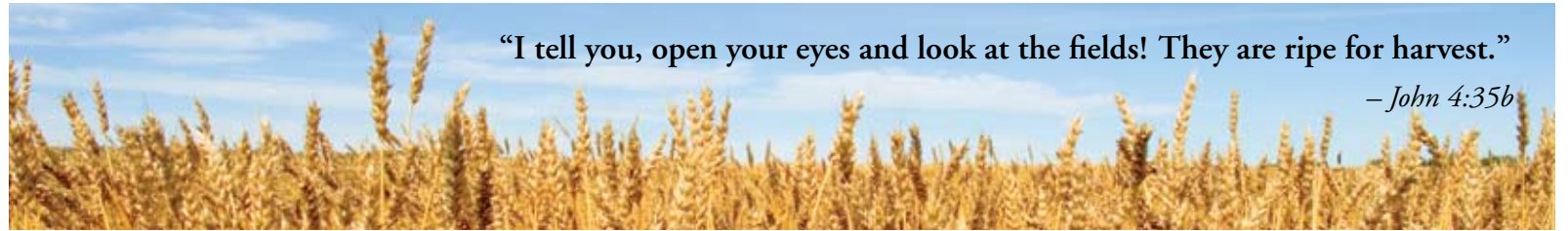
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Seeds of Change: Help Farmers. End Hunger.

by Kimberly Burge

“I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”

—John 4:35b



The heartland of America. Those “amber waves of grain.” The Breadbasket of the World. A field of cotton, white as snow. These are iconic images of the United States, fittingly. Farmers and rural communities have always served and provided for this country and its people.

The Lord’s Prayer, at the heart of Christian faith, includes the appeal that no one should go hungry. Sharing daily bread and the abundant life is what Jesus did, and asks us to do. Love for neighbor is as important as love for God.



Farmers in the United States can be better served by an improved farm bill.

In 2007, the U.S. Congress is expected to reauthorize (or re-new) the farm bill. This piece of legislation is about farms and farmers, but its scope is even broader than that. It touches everyone in this country—everyone who eats, and especially those who struggle to have enough to eat. Even people outside the United States feel its impact. The farm bill includes vital nutrition safety nets that our government provides for those most in need. It is only renewed every five years, so this is a critical opportunity to fight hunger in the United States and around the world.

Across this country, through Bread for the World’s 2007 Offering of Letters, people of faith and conscience will be speaking out for important changes in the farm bill. With much-needed improvements, the farm bill can provide better and broader support for U.S. farmers, strengthen communities in rural America, help hungry people in this country afford a sufficient and nutritious diet, and support the efforts of small-scale farmers in developing countries to sell their crops and feed their families—all things that the current farm bill falls short of doing.

If we want fields ripe for harvest, we must first sow the seeds. Let’s get busy sowing. *Seeds of Change: Help Farmers. End Hunger.*

A Changing Rural Landscape—and Persistent Poverty

The picture of poverty is grim in rural America. The poverty rate in rural areas is 14 percent—2 percent higher than in urban areas. The number is even higher for child poverty: 20 percent, compared to 17 percent in urban areas. Nearly 400 counties across the United States have experienced poverty rates of more than 20 percent for the past 30 years. Nine out of 10 of these “persistent poverty” counties are rural. Unemployment and underemployment rates are higher too, and rural America has higher concentrations of substandard housing.

Nationwide, more than 35 million Americans—including more than 12 million children—live in households that struggle to put food on the table. As with poverty, the food insecurity rate in rural areas is slightly higher, 12 percent compared to 11 percent nationally.

The landscape of rural America is quite different now than during the 1930s, when direct government support for farmers began, yet the farm bill has not kept pace with changing times. Less than 2 percent of the U.S. population is currently engaged in farming, compared to 21 percent in 1930. Today the vast majority of rural residents work in non-farm jobs, such as retail service or factory work. Many farmers, in fact, take second jobs off the farm. Roughly the same amount of farmland is being used, but the farms themselves have grown larger, more specialized and more corporate. Federal farm policy has not kept pace with changes in the farm sector or with changes in rural America.

What the Farm Bill Does Now, and What It Does Not Do

The farm bill principally tries to help U.S. farmers. But over time it has become less and less successful at doing so. The farm bill includes commodity payments, which are cash payments made to farmers growing mostly five crops—corn, wheat, cotton, rice and soybeans. Commodity payments are supposed to protect farmers from low prices by making up the difference between a target price and the actual market price.

In reality, commodity payments are not very effective risk management tools for farmers. Commodity payments have shifted dramatically to the very largest farms, which often are also the wealthiest farmers. Farmers who need payments the least are receiving the most, and two-thirds of U.S. farmers receive no payments.

The portion of the current farm bill devoted specifically to rural development is very small. This is out of balance with the needs of rural America. Some 50 million Americans live in rural communities; only 3 million are farmers. As the main source of federal sup-

port for rural America, the farm bill needs to reflect the fact that increasingly the non-farm economy sustains these communities.

In recent years, U.S. farm policy has also become unintentionally devastating for small-holder farmers in the developing world. Because the commodity payment system encourages U.S. farmers to concentrate on the five crops, world markets are being flooded with these crops, which are sold at prices lower than what it costs to produce them.

For example, in spite of their much lower production costs, cotton farmers in countries like Senegal, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali cannot survive when world prices are so low. U.S. cotton commodity payments are partly to blame. For these African nations, where 10 million people who earn roughly \$1 to \$2 a day depend directly on cotton, U.S. farm programs shatter hopes of reducing hunger and poverty.

The farm bill is also a primary tool for reducing hunger in the United States. The Food Stamp Program, a major component in the farm bill, is our nation's first line of defense against hunger. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, the Food Stamp Program was a shining example of a federal program that responded in a timely and efficient manner. The Food Stamp Program served an average of 26 million people per month in 2005. It should be strengthened to provide a nutritious and sufficient diet for hungry people.

Voices from Rural America

Kevin Miskell is a fifth-generation farmer, raising corn and soybeans on 700 acres in Stanhope, Iowa. He works the land, makes all the decisions on how it is used, and directs the farm's day-to-day operation.

Miskell receives government commodity payments but says that he and other farmers "want a farm program structured so that we get our money from the market, not from the government."

In Helena-West Helena, Arkansas, Ben and Leonora Newell are working, through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), to bring hope to a county that is one of the 20 poorest in the United States. In this community of 15,000, more than 28 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. The Newells work with Together for Hope, CBF's rural poverty initiative.

One of the project's programs is Kingdom Enterprises, a new effort that will focus on attracting small and large businesses to Helena.

"If you can bring 100 new jobs to the community that can pay livable wages, benefits and child care, you're offering something very valuable...that can change the whole outlook of the community," Ben said.

How to Improve the Farm Bill

The farm bill can be made to serve those who need help most: farmers struggling to get by, rural communities that are now less agriculturally based, and people at risk of hunger. You can speak out for them, and you can ask others to speak out, too.

The existing commodity program predominantly rewards a small number of farmers growing certain crops. At the same time, many farmers receive low prices and depend on these government payments to keep their farms afloat. The existing programs skew the benefits to the largest growers, divert scarce resources from rural development, and undercut farmers in the developing world. The United States needs a broader, more equitable safety net that works better for small- and moderate-sized farms. U.S. farmers who want to grow barley, broccoli, pears or pecans, for example, should have the same safety net as those who grow the five program crops the current farm bill now supports. Reforming the existing commodity payment program would also help small-holder

farmers in poor countries get a higher price for their own crops and give them a better chance to escape hunger and poverty.

The bill should also promote conservation and improved land use. Strengthened policies can better reward good stewardship of working farms and ranches, and protect environmentally fragile areas such as wetlands.

Rural development programs should seek to bolster economic development. With greater emphasis on this neglected area, the farm bill can help to generate new jobs and strengthen small businesses in rural communities by investing in rural infrastructure (such as better telecommunications systems and broadband Internet access), supporting rural entrepreneurs, and promoting local initiatives to revitalize rural towns.



Gene Krebs

The U.S. farm bill can and should promote initiatives that help revitalize rural communities.

An increase in funding for the Food Stamp Program could enable the program to reach more people at risk of hunger. Food stamp outreach should also be improved to ensure that more of the eligible people receive the help they need.

A funding increase could also allow families who receive food stamp benefits to afford a more nutritious diet. According to the latest government data, 66 percent of Americans are considered overweight; nearly half of those are obese. Overweight and obesity affect all income groups but are most prevalent in low-income communities. That's because calories are cheap in the United States—it's the nutrients that are expensive. The Food Stamp Program could provide incentives for purchase of fruits and vegetables that would also strengthen local and regional farm-to-market connections.

Emergency food assistance to countries suffering famine and humanitarian crises are also included in the farm bill. The bill should ensure ongoing and consistent U.S. assistance to people in need of emergency food and nutrition support around the world. It should also increase the efficiency of U.S. assistance by allowing some purchase of food in markets outside the United States and some flexibility in the transportation of food aid.

The Power of Seeds

Improving the U.S. farm bill will be an uphill battle indeed. But Bread for the World members know well what any movement that sprouts from a tiny seed can accomplish. Jesus himself assured us this is true: "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move.

Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20)

Let your members of Congress know it's time to start moving mountains. Write letters. Organize an Offering of Letters. Sow, that we all may reap. *Seeds of Change: Help Farmers. End Hunger.*

