

FOOD, FARMS, FAITH

The impact of federal policy on our food system



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Food is a basic need.

Students and teachers need to eat, as do senior citizens and day-care children. Republicans and Democrats need to eat. Veterans and construction workers, insurance agents and journalists need to eat.

Food not only sustains our bodies, but so much of the economy relates to the processes by which we grow, harvest, transport, cook, bake, package, distribute, sell and buy what we eat. "Give us this day our daily bread"

To explain this part of the Lord's Prayer, Martin Luther commented on the provision of "daily bread" by describing the ability of a farmer not only to grow wheat but to plant in peaceful fields and bring crops to a fair market. (LC ref.) There is a system involving the production and consumption of food that needs people to consider it comprehensively if it is to work well.

ELCA members are involved in every point in this system from planting seeds to selling food, and from their own experiences, ELCA advocates care about public policies that affect every part of this process, from supporting growers to concern for all who rely on this country's food supply.

These policies come together in a legislative package known as the farm bill, which addresses agricultural practices, rural and farm economies, food systems, hunger volunteering, nutrition and conservation.

On these pages, you'll find priorities and programs regarding food, hunger and rural development lifted up by the ELCA advocacy network.

Learn about strong farm economies and rural development, jobs and energy; about networks of farms, schools and farmers' markets; about healthy eating and programs to assist families with food and congregations and communities with feeding programs.

Taken together, these farm bill priorities can make us a healthier, stronger and more productive country, especially in our rural counties and small towns. As members of the ELCA, we believe that we are freed in Christ to serve and love our neighbor. With our hands, we do God's work of restoring and reconciling communities in Jesus' name throughout the world. If we can work together, we might be able to sit down and eat- together.

Healthy Food and Food Systems

Federal programs affect the food we eat in many ways. While anti-hunger programs help millions of Americans living in poverty get enough food to eat, nutrition education helps Americans understand what we should, and shouldn't, eat to remain healthy. And federal farm programs support the farmers who grow our food and the systems that move the food from farms to our communities.

These programs play a critical role in combating hunger. Despite the wealth of resources in the United States, 48.8 million Americans are at risk of hunger: one in six adults and one in five children. Particularly in tough economic times, many of those living in poverty depend upon federal nutrition assistance programs to feed themselves and their families. The majority of those who receive this assistance are children, the elderly or people living with a disability. These recipients also include individuals with low-wage, full-time jobs and military families. For these families, assistance programs like the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps), [The Emergency Food Assistance Program](#) (TEFAP) and the [federal school lunch program](#) are the last line of defense against poverty. U.S. food assistance plays a role in reducing hunger around the world through emergency food and sustainable development assistance programs that provide short- and long-term solutions to global poverty. Federal nutrition programs not only aid direct need, but help create long-term self-sufficiency and reduce poverty.

In recent years, many in the public health community have become increasingly concerned about not only whether Americans have enough to eat, but also whether we are eating a healthy diet. Growing rates of obesity, particularly among children, have raised concerns about whether children are eating enough healthy food. In some cases, poor diet is linked to a lack of access to fresh and healthy foods: So-called "food deserts" in both urban and rural communities lack stores that sell fresh fruits and vegetables, and the heavily processed, low-cost food sold at these stores is not the basis of a healthy diet.

These concerns have led the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop new programs to bring more fresh fruits and vegetables to public school cafeterias (which also benefits the local farmers who grow them) and to address urban and rural food deserts with innovative programs such as farmers' markets and cooperative supermarkets (which, again, give local farmers a new outlet for their produce). A program begun in 2008 allows SNAP recipients to use their electronic benefit cards at farmers' markets, thereby ensuring that families living in poverty have better access to fresh fruits and vegetables. And programs that support community gardens (some of them on church grounds!) are teaching people to grow their own fruits and vegetables.

Vibrant Farms and Rural Communities

In the 1930s, when modern farm policy was created, millions of people depended upon farming and ranching for their livelihoods. Most farms were relatively small operations that fed people locally, or perhaps regionally, and they produced a variety of crops and livestock for the consumption of the family that owned the land and for the benefit of its surrounding community.

Fast forward 80 years or so, and American agriculture is profoundly different. Although the vast majority of farms are still family-owned operations, many of them are multimillion-dollar businesses encompassing thousands of acres and are growing food that is shipped around the country and around the world. These farms are highly efficient and highly productive, but they have [profoundly impacted the rural communities that surround them](#). These communities have seen their populations drop dramatically as farms grow ever larger, and the average age of their residents climbs as children graduate from school and, unable to find good jobs in their hometowns, leave to find work in cities. The average age of farmers continues to climb as well: In 2007, when the last farm bill was written, the average farmer was 58 years old; in 1945, the average farmer was 39 years old. And the increasing size and economic clout of large farms has driven up the price of farmland in many parts of the country, making it difficult for beginning farmers to enter the business unless they are in a position to inherit an existing farm.

However, the past decade has seen a transformation in the way we view our food and has provided an opportunity for agricultural communities to rebuild their economies, care for the land, and attract a new generation of farmers. The growing demand for “local” food has driven explosive growth in farmers’ markets and other “direct to consumer” marketing by smaller farmers. The new interest in local, organic and seasonal food, coupled with public health concerns about obesity, particularly among our children and youth, and the recognition that in many communities in our country access to fresh and healthy food is limited, have combined to generate new opportunities and markets for farmers and rural economies.

Since 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been directing more funds toward the development of a new generation of farmers, and their efforts are beginning to bear fruit. Small farms, operated by younger and more diverse farmers, including women and minorities, are increasing in all parts of the country. Many of these farms are selling directly to consumers through farmers’ markets or other Community Supported Agriculture projects, but most lack access to the processing and distribution infrastructure, which tends to cater to the largest farms. For these new farms to grow and to meet the growing demand for healthy, seasonal and local food, a regional food infrastructure (consisting of small slaughterhouses and packing plants rooted in rural communities, catering to small and mid-size farms and employing rural workers) must be rebuilt.

Through the “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative, the USDA has used programs funded by the 2008 farm bill to provide start-up funding for regional food hubs and small-scale (and even mobile) slaughterhouses. These programs are growing rural economies and generating rural jobs and have the potential to do more if they are funded by Congress and allowed to continue. In addition, programs in the conservation title of the farm bill are often well suited to small farming operations and have the potential to help them grow their income as well as protect land and water in rural communities for future generations.