

House's Farm Bill Vote Calls Christians to Speak Up for Vulnerable

House Republicans passed a farm bill last week that did not include funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) - or food stamps, breaking the 40-year strategy of combining food stamps and farm subsidies in a single bill.

Republicans prioritized farm subsidies over food stamps, agribusinesses - like sugar cane - over the nutritional needs of the low-income.

Democrats protested that vote would take food off the table of the poor.

Republicans promised swift action to introduce a food stamp bill.

Some 47 million Americans depend on SNAP to meet some of their nutritional needs, especially senior citizens and children. One out of seven Americans receive benefits that range from around \$130 per month per individual to \$270 for a family, according to Associated Press.

Based on press reports, about the only ones who supported the farm bill are the 216 House Republicans who voted for it.

Both Heritage Action and the Club of Growth, two fiscally conservative groups, opposed the bill because cuts in farm subsidies weren't deep enough.

The Washington Post [reported](#) that the Club for Growth said that the farm bill is "loaded down with market-distorting giveaways to special interests with no path established to remove the government's involvement in the agriculture industry."

Leaders of America's faith community spoke against splitting apart the farm bill, and then the bill itself.

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“Adequate and nutritious food is a basic need and a fundamental human right that is integral to protecting the life and dignity of the human person,” [wrote](#) Bishop Stephen Blaire, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ committee on domestic justice and human development, to Congress the day before the vote.

“Comprehensive legislation such as the Farm Bill invariably involves compromise but this compromise cannot come at the expense of poor and hungry people,” he said. “I respectfully urge you to reject efforts to reduce or restructure SNAP and pursue the common good in agriculture and food policy that works from a genuine preferential option for the poor.”

Ferrell Foster, interim director of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, tweeted on the day of the vote that the House bill was “stupid.”

He added, “It hurts the poor and farmers.”

Writing in the *National Catholic Reporter*, Michael Sean Winters [said](#), “The bill is not good for hungry children or hungry elders. But, it is good politics ‘for the G.O.P.’ It certainly is not good for the GOP’s constituents.”

David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, expressed deep disappointment in the House bill, saying that it would harm the poor.

“We are disappointed that the House passed a ‘farm-only’ farm bill. Splitting the farm bill will not only hamper the ability of people to buy food, but have consequences for those involved in the farming, manufacturing and processing of our food,” [said](#) Beckmann.

While Republican leaders claimed that they will introduce a new bill to deal with SNAP, media reports suggest such claims are dubious.

How quickly will a bill be presented? How deep will the cuts be for food stamps in a new bill? Will the bill even pass the House?

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As I read the news stories about the House vote, I kept asking myself “What part of God’s command in Deuteronomy 15:11 do Americans not get?”

What does Deuteronomy 15:11 say?

God said, “I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.’”

A few verses earlier, God said to the people of Israel, “You shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him” (Deuteronomy 15:7-8).

One need not read the Bible literally to hear clearly the message: God expects his people to care for the poor – and to do so generously.

Granted, a straight line doesn’t run from the Hebrew text to SNAP.

SNAP isn’t the fulfillment of the Bible’s moral command. SNAP is, however, the best thing U.S. Christians have in a sinful world. And in a sinful world, programs have flaws that need reform.

Nonetheless, the most vulnerable are placed at greater risk when scoring partisan points is more important than advancing the common good and when rewarding special interests trumps the public’s welfare.

Christianity has an unambiguous message – protect the poor. Christians need to ask Congress to do so.

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