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Farm Bill 2007 Testimony to US Agricultural Secretary Mike Johanns

From: Edie Jessup, Fresno Metro Ministry Hunger & Nutrition Project

Good Afternoon, Secretary Johanns. My name is Edie Jessup. I am privileged to work for Fresno Metro Ministry, a faith based organization, on a Hunger & Nutrition Food Security Project focused on access to healthy, affordable, culturally acceptable food by all Fresnans. I speak for the hard work of some 80 local organizations and interfaith communities linked to like collaboratives throughout California.

I will be presenting the results to you in September of a community food assessment of Fresno County, focused on low income communities, with information on food access and food security. Or, I should say lack of access, by some 40% of adults to local fresh food.

As you are wrestling with the future of agriculture, and indeed the future of health given the epidemic of disease by diet; and indeed wrestling with the economic globalization of the ag industry today, it gives me pause.

You see, I come very blatantly from a perspective, and a place. My perspective is heavily a social justice perspective, and my place is the Fresno area of the San Joaquin Valley, where we indeed grow food for the nation and world. I come from a place critically positioned, that is a microcosm of what is happening to land, water, food, and people around the world. I think agricultural policy affects the social fabric of all our lives. The 2007 Farm Bill does not just affect America's entire agricultural community. Farm policy, on your watch will affect all of the American people and the people of the world. It will be a legacy of health, good employment for growing families and communities, and responsible for modeling sustainability and access to food for the planet.

Government has a part to play in solutions to the unique issues of an agricultural giant like the San Joaquin Valley. The gaming of the agricultural industry is breaking the system. The nation is dependent in the sustainable rich product of this valley land and the diverse people who provide the nation and the world with food. Loss of and lack of access to land by our farmers is one part, along with hunger and ruined land, and horrific air pollution. We need your focused

consideration on health of the land, health of the farm economy, and health of the general population becoming chronically ill because we are not investing in what we know is right and what we can do: feeding folks fresh food, as local as possible.

There are three recommendations

1. Do not retreat from fully Funding Federal Nutrition Programs until we can assure healthy food access to all of our population. People are customers of farmers. Government has a role, and I assure you that charity cannot do it. Assure that all children have 2 square healthy meals at school, with farm grown food without competition from food that is giving them chronic disease. See that all working low income folks have enough healthy food on the table until they earn a living wage through a low barrier Food Stamp program. Our Board of Supervisors has proclaimed that fully enrolling eligible people in Fresno County would add an additional \$89 million dollars to the economy here THAT WOULD BE SPENT ON FOOD, OUR LOCAL PRODUCT. Farmers, selling locally would benefit. Jobs would be created.

2. Partner with the Department of Defense, who the USDA contracts with for commodity fresh produce for the nation. Set up a hub in the Valley (maybe at a base they are closing, and use the infrastructure that exists), contract for the excess product of our farmers and get all schools and people living in poverty healthy food. Cheap at the price considering the obesity health bill being mailed to the nation. USDA could solve a food security problem by doing this, and jump starting value added infrastructure to an ag area plagued by chronic double digit unemployment. By investing in pulling out peach trees you have fostered a new scarcity of food in a country and world in need, and closed down a farm future. You won't have new farmers, you won't have homeland security unless you think about plenty instead of scarcity.

Policy that increases local use of farm produce will also increase commodity availability, and decrease transportation of product, helping address the air quality miasma here in the Valley. There is local demand for local food that is being ignored by mega national decisionmakers. The agricultural savvy refugees to the Valley could help expand the economy and availability of good food.

In looking at unintended consequences, consider the consequence of a broken local food system is what we are seeing with 40% of our adult population in Fresno County being food insecure, a decrease in choice of local fresh product available to these ?customers? and a decrease in value added, local processors for food to export to assure a healthy workforce in our country.

By investing in the infrastructure of rural America, the DOD model of food provided to the nation from Fresno and the Valley's small farms begs the return of federal dollars to support low wage work. The Farm Bill 2007 could begin to remedy and change the policy attitude from scarcity to plenty, expand agricultural products through distribution, and provide the health solution laboratory for the Department of Health on Obeisty prevention.

3. Lastly, I appeal to you to listen to our Fresno County Board of Supervisors, who unanimously declared Fresno County a Food Stamp Friendly County. Please invest in Food Stamp modernization and expansion -and Nutrition and Healthy food education by the USDA, because you and your nutrition network are the experts and provide the essential

food safety net for the country. The Farm Bill is the hub of a solution to the very real diet based obesity epidemic. The individual is only a part of the solution, environmental change is proven through research to be necessary to change the health outcomes we see. Food Stamp users are Farmers customers. Federal nutrition programs (including Food Stamps and school meal programs), and nutrition education and outreach to enroll eligible neighbors (call it marketing farmer's food!) is essential to creating food security, The Food Stamp nutrition program stimulates the economy (every \$1 in Food Stamps spent increases \$1.87 in economic stimulus and an additional \$.07 is available in sales tax locally. Level the playing field for farmers raising directly edible food; level the playing field for access to fruits and vegetables and nutritious foods for our good health with the new Dietary Guidelines, a newly calculated Thrifty Food Plan, and for our good farm based economy.

The Farm Bill could provide a strengthened partnership with the food and agriculture industry, with community organizations working to build healthy neighborhoods, and create a statewide infrastructure for delivering effective healthy food to the Valley, the country, and the world. Play the hero in this fragmented landscape. It would be a possible legacy for our children and grandchildren.

Our Community is educated about what we need to create a healthy, food secure nation. We are ready to join the USDA in working toward a vision of a healthy, well fed nation and world that saves our land, and supports our farmers.

Let's get busy.

There would be incentive and investment in our brilliant specialty crop farmers, so they can co-op and market farm to school to all the Valley schools, new farmers markets, and create new specialty crop assets.

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