

Food Insecurity and the Working Poor

A Food Policy Brief calling for a regional food system that supports healthy equitable, access, opportunities, and outcomes for workers

Who We Are

The Southwest Workers Union (SWU), with 3,500 members in San Antonio and South Texas, works to connect issues of food justice and equity to local environmental, labor, health and economic revitalization issues, while reframing public policy to include the voices of community members most affected. SWU's membership is concentrated in Bexar, Medina, and Travis counties and largely consists of working class families and youth of color. Our members are often underemployed or working at or near minimum wage jobs, and living at or below the poverty threshold. Programs outlined in this Food Policy brief highlight federal food and farm programs most useful in addressing barriers to growing and accessing healthy, local and culturally relevant food that also reinforce the regional economy within Southwest Texas.



Our Position

A food justice movement built upon the values of equity, justice, and opportunity within the food system requires policies that protect consumers, vulnerable communities, farmers, labor, and the environment. A robust and just food system incorporates and strengthens each of these components rather than further isolating the process from food production to consumption, which breaks the rich relationship of food producer with the consumer. Food and farm policies with local to international implications have diminished the livelihood options in local food systems, displaced small-scale producers, diminished local food retailers, and marginalized poorer consumers. As a result, the divide between those who can access a diverse and healthy diet and those who work hard but cannot, continues to grow exponentially throughout the United States, and particularly so within South Texas.

Federal programs within the Nutrition Title of the US Farm Bill, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) / Food Stamps, the Emergency Food Assistance Program, and others, are part of the bare bones safety net that alleviates hunger and malnutrition for only the most vulnerable. However many other programs, including the Community Food Project Grants, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) and SNAP Nutritional Education (SNAP-Ed) programs create opportunities for community-based solutions to food insecurity, nutritional education, and healthy community development that is more sustainable. These federally funded programs and others are key elements of a Full and Fair Food and Farm Bill critical for struggling households and our local economy.

SNAP FACTS:

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides supplemental income to purchase food to Americans that make less than \$28,000 (for a family of four)

- The average benefit is \$1.48 per meal
- Every \$5 spent in SNAP benefits generates \$9 in economic activity
- Each \$1 billion of retail food demand from SNAP recipients generates 3,300 farm jobs

Farm Bill Background

The Farm Bill is a comprehensive piece of legislation that sets the overall direction of federal food and farm policy, including commodity distribution, provisions on agricultural trade, technical assistance to socially disadvantaged producers, incentives to new and beginning farmers, conservation, rural development, foreign food aid, and domestic food and nutrition assistance such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Every five years, Congress renews the Farm Bill to include a set of new laws and amendments through a reauthorization process, the last of which was passed in 2008. The Agriculture Committees of Congress have jurisdiction over the Farm Bill, both of which are currently comprised of Republican majorities.

The Farm Bill has been awaiting serious Congressional consideration for two years now. In 2012, the Farm Bill reauthorization process was delayed, negotiated behind closed doors, allowed to expire, and ultimately extended as we moved into 2013. And now we seem to have followed a similar course of action, driving the Farm Bill to its second expiration in two years, expiring on October 1st. Yes, at the time of this printing, we are currently functioning without a Farm Bill, and regulating under permanent law dating as far back as 1938, leaving several critical programs stranded.

Current House and Senate proposals threaten to drastically cut SNAP funding by billions of dollars over the next decade. SNAP, as well as programs such as the Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, have fed vulnerable low-income people, children and the elderly throughout the country. Unfortunately, the Farm Bill debates have yet to identify these programs as dispensable and Committee negotiations are yet to arrive at any fair agreement on a new Farm Bill for 2013.

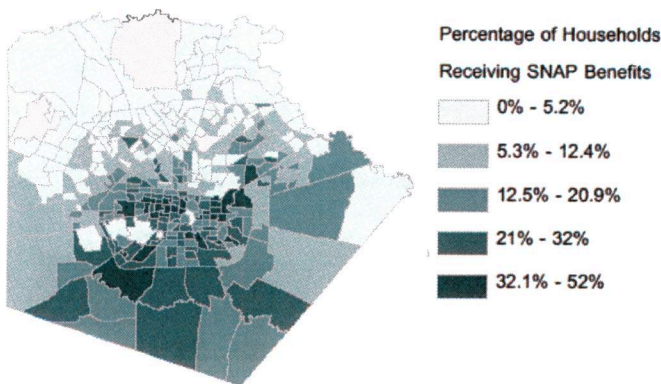
U.S. Congressional Representatives

Bexar County Representatives		Party	Home Town/City	District
	Joaquin Castro	D	San Antonio	20
	Lamar S. Smith	R	San Antonio	21
	Pete Gallego	D	Alpine	23
	Henry Cuellar	D	Laredo	28
	Lloyd Doggett	D	Austin	35
Travis County Representatives		Party	Home Town/City	District
	Michael T. McCaul	R	Austin	10
	Lamar S. Smith	R	San Antonio	21
	Bill Flores	R	Bryan	17
	Roger Williams	R	Weatherford	25
	Lloyd Doggett	D	Austin	35
Medina County Representative		Party	Home Town/City	District
	Pete Gallego	D	Alpine	23

Regional Landscape

In Texas, nutrition assistance programs are of particular importance because 1 in 5 individuals lives in poverty, and 1 in 5 children lives with hunger. Texas is at once plagued by high rates of food insecurity and obesity, a situation made worse by the fact that 1 in 4 individuals does not have health care. Among counties with the highest percentage of households receiving SNAP benefits nationwide, South Texas had three in the top ten: Hidalgo (35%); Webb (31%); and Cameron (28%). However, Texas also ranks among the states with the lowest participation in SNAP among SNAP eligible residents (65%), particularly those of which are among the eligible working poor (59%). As mentioned in the introduction section, "SWU members are often underemployed or working at or near minimum wage jobs, and living at or below the poverty threshold." The majority of SNAP participants as well as those eligible for benefits but not currently participating in the program are a fair representation of the majority of Southwest Workers Union's 3,500 members and their families in Texas.

Overall, in San Antonio, the urban center of South Texas, 15.4% of households (county level data) receives SNAP benefits, a segment of the population in which Latinos are significantly overrepresented. Local emergency food assistance data also shows that Latinos more frequently sought food assistance, as well as the following populations: the working poor, children, elderly, and single-female headed households. For these vulnerable communities the implementation of a national Farm Bill not only has a direct impact on daily life, but also presents a window of oppor-



Bexar County (San Antonio) 2011 SNAP participation by census tract

tunity to build long-term equity into the local food system and community at large.

In recent years, studies have extensively explored the contributing role of environmental factors in community health outcomes, including the ability to access and afford a healthy diet. The 2010 White House Task Force on

Intersections with Public Health & the Economy

Childhood Obesity found that limited access to healthy choices can lead to poor diets and higher levels of obesity and other diet-related diseases. In addition, limited access to affordable food choices can lead to higher levels of food insecurity, increasing the number of low- and moderate-income families without access to enough food to sustain a healthy and active life. There is a growing body of research that finds an association between food insecurity and obesity, suggesting that hunger and obesity are two sides of the same coin.

In Texas alone the cost of food insecurity and hunger has been estimated at \$9 billion, due to increased health care costs, poor education outcomes, and the expense of charitable organizations that work to keep families fed.

Meanwhile:

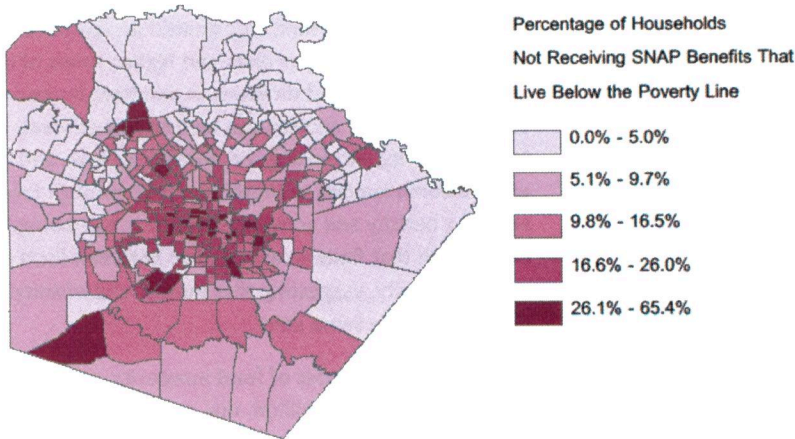
- Approximately two thirds of adult Texans are overweight or obese;
- 36.6 % of Texas youth are also overweight or obese; and
- Within low-income households in Texas, this number rises to 53.8 % of children.

Local, Nutrition, and Specialty Crop Programs of the Farm Bill improve the access of healthy food for low-income households, and studies show that participation in SNAP in particular, may reduce the risk of obesity for some children and adolescents. For every dollar of SNAP benefits received, participating households increased their food spending by up to 47 cents, an increased buying power that has been associated with greater fruit and vegetable consumption among SNAP participants. Since SNAP expanded in 2009, according to the USDA, "food insecurity among likely SNAP-eligible households declined by 2.2 %; very low food security declined by 2%; and food spending rose by 4.8 %."

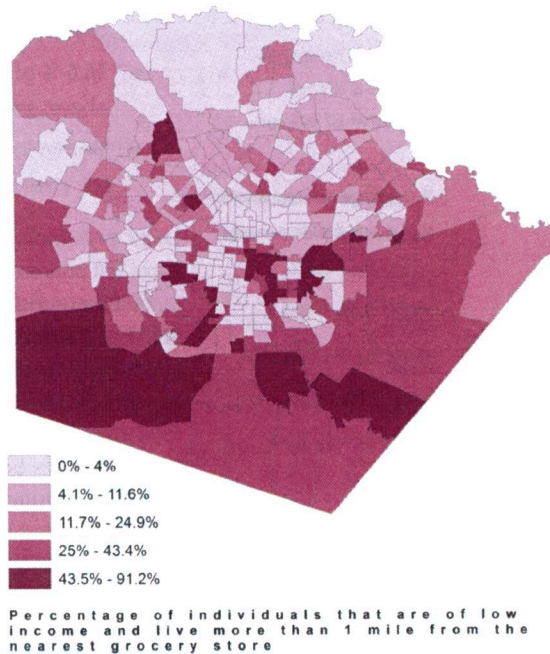
Intersections of Working Families and Food Insecurity

While SNAP has been attacked recently by conservative lawmakers and stigmatized with an image of “dependency class,” the program and others covered in the Farm Bill have helped lift millions of people out of poverty. In Bexar County and similarly in Texas as a whole, over 81% of households receiving SNAP benefits had at least one worker in the family within the last year. Additionally, 96% of SNAP recipients who worked in the year prior to receiving benefits also worked after starting to receive assistance.

In 2010, 46 % of households served by the San Antonio Food Bank were considered working, and an additional 8 % had recently become unemployed.



The Hunger in America 2010 survey showed that in the San Antonio metropolitan area, 46% of households served by the San Antonio Food Bank (SAFB) were considered working poor, and an additional 8% had recently become unemployed. A significant number of households served by SAFB did not realize they were eligible for SNAP benefits, while in households that participated in SNAP, over 85% said that benefits did not last the entirety of the month leading them to also seek emergency food assistance. Without substantial SNAP outreach and education, families in need must choose between food and other necessities and fall back on emergency food assistance programs that are already experiencing greater demand because of the upcoming cuts to SNAP benefits and are furthermore, threatened under the current Farm Bill situation.



SWU Community Stories

Kimberly Rendon, resident of San Antonio, TX

My family currently receives SNAP benefits. My father was recently laid off from work and was not able to provide for the family like he used to and my mom is a housewife so it was necessary to get benefits. I have 3 younger siblings, a sister and two brothers. They are currently in high school and those benefits provide necessary nutrition for us. If the government decides to further cut SNAP benefits then we wouldn't be able to eat properly. Usually we get the basics like milk and eggs, but it would be beneficial to provide more new nutritional things for the family. Out of necessity we tend to get the things that are not necessarily the best choices because they are cheaper and qualify under the program. But it's also important for us to have fresh fruits and vegetables. My dad is currently looking for work, but the circumstances have put a strain on our family financially. SNAP is a necessity for many families especially in these economic times where people are getting laid off or financially unstable in their work. The SNAP program is something struggling families can rely on to help them out.

SNAP FACTS:

Proposed cuts to SNAP will reduce Texas' total benefits by \$411 million and affect over 2.3 million children.

Cafeteria Workers, San Antonio, Texas

In another recent interview, one SWU member and San Antonio Independent School District cafeteria worker talked about her experience making 50 cents above minimum wage, which equated to approximately \$520 every two weeks. While her family struggled to pay bills, she said they did not dare rely on any form of public assistance. The complex issue of cultural stigma and the lack of multifaceted approaches to reducing food disparities leaves many working families in a cycle of systemic poverty, malnutrition, and marginalization with little to no alternatives.

Building collective impact to support workers' rights to food justice

LOCAL

SWU's Roots of Change gardening cooperative was developed in 2006 to empower marginalized groups within the industrial food system to create community based opportunities for healthy, local, affordable, culturally appropriate food. The Roots of Change gardening cooperative seeks to address the systemic barriers to food access through education, leadership development, and civic engagement that promotes crosscutting policies that support healthy community development. The Roots of Change garden now in its 8th year of operation serves as a model for strengthening the ability of local producers to learn about growing their own food while meeting the needs of the local community.



REGIONAL

South by Southwest Experiment

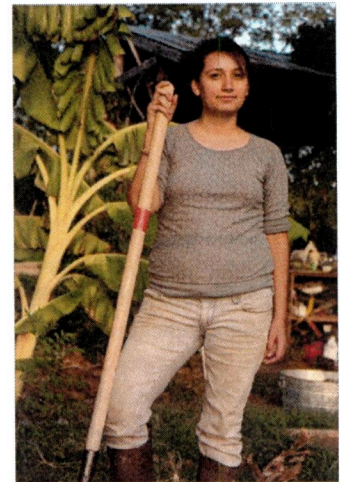
The South by Southwest Experiment, a partnership between Southwest Workers Union, Southwest Organizing Project (Albuquerque, NM), and Southern Echo (Jackson, MS), is a product of creating alliances between communities of color in order to share history, culture, and strategies to uplift disenfranchised communities. The South by Southwest Experiment seeks to promote opportunities and policies that target environmental, economic, health, and food issues in our communities. This includes the development of programs that empower residents through reclaiming culturally appropriate farming and food, while building both social and economic capital in the community. Effective programs have targeted social problems within the community and work to build community cohesion and internal resources.



The broader challenge for community initiatives is to go beyond reclaiming healthy spaces to challenging and claiming political space. This involves engaging community members on issues affecting our neighborhoods in order to prioritize our concerns and build community capacity to affect policy change. In this sense, the issue of healthy communities is an avenue to demand a more democratic and participatory governance process. The South by Southwest Experiment continues to work towards this goal by fostering dialogue and sharing strategies that empower our communities.

NATIONAL

Diana Lopez, Interim Executive Director of the Southwest Workers Union is a Fellow of the **Everybody at the Table for Health (EAT4Health)** Initiative. It is a three-year national leadership development initiative of the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation supported by [multiple funding partners](#) that aims to fill gaps in the existing food policy advocacy ecosystem in order to make it more inclusive of low-income and people of color communities, more responsive to grassroots needs and ideas, and more effective in terms of protecting the environment, promoting good health, and rebuilding strong local economies.



Under the EAT4Health Initiative SWU partners with the Rural Coalition, one of the most grassroots-oriented and culturally-diverse organizations advocating for systemic change and equity in food and farm policy. With over 90 grassroots member organizations across the Nation, the Rural Coalition serves as a critical advocacy voice of African-American, American-Indian, Asian-American, Euro-American, Latino, and women farmers, ranchers, farmworkers, migrant workers and immigrants throughout the U.S. For the 2008 Farm Bill, the Rural Coalition was able to secure more than 30 sections of policies that uplifted equity and justice across the titles of the Farm Bill. SWU also participates in the GOAT (Getting Our Act Together) collaborative, which promotes a fair Farm Bill with equity and sustainability. This year the GOAT collaborative released a statement with over 425 organizational signatures amounting to over 1 million people in over 40 states calling for a full and fair Farm Bill now. Southwest Workers Union collaborates closely with the National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association and other strategically aligned groups that work to influence food and environmental policy from local, state and national levels.

SWU Food Policy Objectives that work for Southwest Texas

FAIR LABOR STANDARDS

Part of a safe and sustainable food system is ensuring that the people that grow, harvest, process, transport, and prepare our food are treated fairly and with dignity. Worker rights are as important to us as organics and buying local. Almost one-third of food workers suffer food insecurity, meaning they are unable to access enough safe and nutritious food to meet their needs. Food workers rely on food stamps to meet their needs at 1.5 times the rate of the general workforce. SWU members including public school cafeteria workers are engaged in both local and federal fights for a living wage.

Raise the Wage - We support increasing the minimum wage for food workers across the food chain at both the federal and state levels. According to a recent report released by the Food Labor Research Center at UC Berkeley, raising the minimum wage for the benefit of 29 million low-wage workers - including almost 8 million food workers - would only cost the average household about an additional 10 cents per day for food (see the report at www.rocunited.org/dime-a-day).

Furthermore, we also reject elements that weaken protections for consumers (including those in need of food assistance), and for producers, labor and the environment. These include provisions restricting SNAP eligibility as well as those related to the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Act (GIPSA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Commerce Clause, and the Fair Labor Standards Act (House Bill Section 10008).

ACCESS TO FOOD

The most vulnerable communities within Southwest Texas, including the working poor, children, elderly, and single-female headed households of predominantly Latino background, experience difficulty in accessing healthy, affordable food.

Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) helps expand access to healthy food by administering loans and grants in “food deserts,” improving the health of families and creating and preserving jobs. We support the President’s full budget request for HFFI and ask that these grants and loans be made available and accessible to socially disadvantaged and underserved communities.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) supplements the diets of low-income individuals by providing emergency food and nutrition assistance, largely through food banks. TEFAP will continue so long as it is funded through appropriations, but the program will not receive an increase without the Farm Bill. It is critical that we increase TEFAP to help the working poor that do not qualify for SNAP and those vulnerable community members that would be malnourished or go hungry without.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) primarily serves low-income senior citizens by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA foods.

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In Bexar county, over 83% of individuals 65 years of age and older live at least 1 mile from the nearest grocery store.



Since 2009 the number of farmers markets accepting food stamps has tripled to more than 3,000 nationwide, according to the advocacy group, Farmers Market Coalition. In that time, food stamp redemptions at markets have shot up four times, to more than \$16 million a year.



The **Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program** provides low-income seniors with coupons that can be exchanged for eligible foods (fruits, vegetables, honey, and fresh cut herbs) at farmers' markets, roadside stands, and community supported agriculture programs.

Fresh Fruit and Vegetables Program provides free fresh fruits and vegetables to elementary school children throughout the school day in school districts with a high proportion of low-income students.

EMPOWERING LOCAL and REGIONAL SOLUTIONS

Local food systems across the nation are enhancing nutrition and health for our population, while advancing economic vitality in cities and rural areas alike. SWU supports a full re-authorization for five years to fund local food programs that directly benefit Southwest Texas.

Specifically these include:

Organic Cost Share – Continue to provide national organic certification cost share assistance to farmers and handlers for their annual certification costs, which would maintain funding and merge the two current programs and maintain this cost-share in every state.

Specialty Crop Block Grants – Re-authorize Specialty Crop Block Grants at the House bill's level.

Community Food Projects - Aim to fight food insecurity by supporting the development of community-based food projects in low-income communities. This program awards grants to projects that: meet the food needs of low-income people; increase self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs; and promote comprehensive responses to local farm, food, and nutrition issues; or meet specific neighborhood, local, or state agriculture needs, including needs for infrastructure development and improvement and planning for long-term solutions. The program also creates innovative marketing activities that mutually benefit agricultural producers and low-income consumers. Some more popular examples include community gardens and food hubs.

Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program – Re-authorize and fund the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program, which provides funding for programs that expand important food systems in one of the fastest growing areas in agriculture, including food hubs.

Coordination of Urban Agriculture – Accept House language (**Sec. 12317**) to provide a directive to USDA to coordinate opportunities for urban agriculture.

CSAs and Farmer Markets – The proposed Senate bill allows community supported agriculture operations to be SNAP retailers and authorizes pilots to try out new mobile technology like smartphones at farmers markets to make it easier for farmers markets to participate in SNAP.

NUTRITION, FOOD ED FOR COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES

SWU strongly urges full support of the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**. Most changes and cuts to the Nutrition Title appear inspired by misinformation describing how the SNAP program works or the families whom it assists. We oppose all cuts to Title IV, and we strongly support the continuation of the SNAP Education and Outreach Program.

SNAP Nutrition Education – Accept the **Senate** language (**Section 4017**) that refines how the program provides technical assistance to educate people receiving SNAP on how to stretch their dollars and eat well. The House version (Section 4028) eliminates the program and should be rejected.

Hunger-Free Communities Incentives Grant – Accept the **Senate provision** in **Section 4204**, which updates a series of successful programs that incentivize the use of SNAP benefits for fruits and vegetables while building markets for local farmers with \$100 million in funding over the next five years.

CONSERVATION FORESTRY AND ENERGY

We strongly support a Farm Bill with full funding and continuation of programs that help producers protect soil, land, forests, water and other resources, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Programs, the Conservation Innovation Grants Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, the Conservation Reserve Program, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program; as well as the full range of forestry stewardship and other programs to restore the health of our forests. We also favor a national sodsaver provision, as in the Senate bill, and all provisions that advance the inclusion of all producers in these policies and programs.

PROTECT AND EXPAND CREDIT ACCESS, EQUITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Producers need access to credit and programs in order to grow their food and be economically viable workers in this industry. We strongly support funding for credit programs, as well as the new authority to continue the innovative microloan program already demonstrating great success in the version set in place this year by the USDA, which has already funded more than 3,000 microloans.

Specifically, these would include:

Rural Residency Requirement for Operating Loans to Youth – Open the youth loan program to all youth seeking to enter agriculture by removing the rural residency requirement. The House language would allow skills to be developed which could be very instrumental in developing the next generation of agriculture professionals.

Personal Liability for Youth Loans – Accept the language in the **House bill (Sec. 5103)** to provide the Secretary authority to waive personal liability for youth loans due to circumstances beyond borrower control on a case-by-case basis if any default on the loan was due to circumstances beyond the control of the borrower.

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Accounts Pilot Program – Include direct funding for this important program, which provides incentives for beginning producers to develop operational funding, for the full five years of the new bill

Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers (Senate Sec. 12001 and House Sec. 12201) – The committees have expanded the Outreach and Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged to include Veteran Farmers and Ranchers with a 50 percent reduction from previous funding levels. We strongly support this important program and urge restoration of full support.

Receipt for Service – Accept the **House provision (Sec. 12204)** that requires USDA agencies serving farmers and

ranchers to routinely provide a time and date stamped receipt to each farmer and rancher requesting information or service from USDA. The automatic provision of a receipt for all service to all farmers and ranchers will assist both the producers and USDA by providing clarity and documentation of the timing and purpose of the service request, action taken, additional information and assistance provided, requests denied, reasons for inability to meet a request, and follow-up specified.

Increase of Opportunity for Minority and Women Businesses and Farmers – Accept House Provision (Sec. 12318) stating the sense of Congress that the Federal Government should increase business opportunities for small businesses, and for minority and women farmers and businesses.

Overall, SWU supports equity, justice, opportunity, and access across all titles of the Farm Bill and fully supports retaining permanent law that would re-authorize a complete a full, fair and intact bill for five years, retaining existing permanent Farm Bill law and maintaining an intact bill with all programs re-authorized for the same period including:

The Full Nutrition Title – Food and farm programs belong together in the Farm Bill, and we urge you to include a full Nutrition Title that is re-authorized on the same schedule as the rest of the bill.

A Full array of Disaster Programs – This includes a complete array of emergency programs for all producers. As climate change makes weather more unpredictable, producers across the nation have been left stranded in the past year due to the earlier expiration of disaster programs in the previous Farm Bill. These programs need to be a part of the Bill and run concurrent with the term of the full Farm Bill.

Continued Authorization of Discretionary Programs – We urge you to preserve the continuity of all discretionary programs. The current process is a way to further develop successful programs and to aid in their success, and remove or alter programs that are not working in an effective manner for all concerned. In every new Farm Bill, new programs are begun and programs are removed or otherwise altered. The same process should be continued into the future.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Southwest Workers Union's approach to food justice is rooted in eliminating barriers to food access through education, leadership development, and advocacy promoting bold cross-cutting policies that support healthy community development with an emphasis on empowering marginalized groups to seek healthy, regional and worker-conscious options to food that are also good for the economy.

Please contact Diana Lopez, Interim Executive Director of Southwest Workers Union if you would like more information on this brief. SWU welcomes your request to provide testimonials from our members on food justice and its intersection with the environment, the economy, community, and the workplace. These include but are not limited to the intersection of food and farming with workers rights, minimum wage, climate change, environmental justice, urban gardening for marginalized communities, and organizing in support of food chain workers and youth.

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This food policy brief was produced in collaboration with the Rural Coalition under the Eat4Health Initiative.

