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Advocates want more out of farm bill

By: EDWARD SIFUENTES - Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO ---- Farm and anti-hunger advocates said they want Congress to stress sustainable farming methods, nutrition programs and other policies when it revises the federal farm bill next year.

Several groups, including the San Diego Hunger Coalition, the California Food and Justice Coalition and the Tierra Miguel Foundation, sponsored a forum Friday in San Diego to discuss some of their objectives as Congress takes up the bill in 2007.

The bill governs much of the nation's farm and food policy, everything from school lunches to farm subsidies, and is renewed about every five years.

Since most of the money spent under the bill goes to food stamps and farm subsidies, much of the attention goes to those programs, said Heather Fenney, a coordinator with the Los Angeles-based California Food and Justice Coalition. She and other advocates want lawmakers to pay attention to their concerns.

"The farm bill (revision) is usually dominated by a few voices, and clearly it affects more people than that," Fenney said.

About two dozen people attended the forum at the City Heights Wellness Center in San Diego. Among those in the audience were representatives for Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer; and U.S. Reps. Brian Bilbray, R-Escondido and Bob Filner, D-Chula Vista.

Beth Levendoski, director of the Pauma Valley-based Tierra Miguel Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to agricultural land renewal and preservation, said she wants lawmakers to help small farmers stay in business and diversify San Diego County's crop.

"We need more locally grown food," she said.

Agriculture is the fifth-largest industry in the county, with a crop value of \$1.5 billion. However, Levendoski said she sees problems in local agriculture, including labor shortages, poor water quality, high land costs and foreign competition.

She said that with federal help, local farmers could help produce more organic produce to sell at local markets.

Since the farm bill was last approved in 2002, the federal government has spent \$782 billion on its various programs. Food stamps and other nutrition programs accounted for about 55 percent of that spending, advocates said.

But the county is not getting its fair share of the money, advocates said.

Tia Anzellotti, director of the San Diego Hunger Coalition, said only about 25 percent of families in the county who are eligible to receive food stamps enroll in the program. She said that's because there are structural and logistical barriers.

Poor families who have savings of \$2,000 or more are ineligible for the program, Anzellotti said. That discourages families from saving, making it less likely that they will improve their situation. Moreover, she said the application process should be streamlined and should be made available via the Internet.

The program should also encourage people to make better choices about nutrition, Anzellotti said. Creating incentives for families

to buy healthy foods will curb obesity and other potential health risks, she said.

Advocates said they plan to lobby lawmakers to incorporate some of these ideas into next year's farm bill. Fenney said the federal government can do more to reduce the number of 12 million Americans who go to bed hungry.

"These two programs (farm subsidies and food stamps) have become a substitute for a real food policy of farm to plate," Fenney said.

The groups said they plan to host an advocacy-training session for people who would like to volunteer in their efforts. The training is scheduled for 10 a.m. to noon Feb. 20 at the City Heights Wellness Center in San Diego. Call (619) 641-7510, Ext. 244.

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