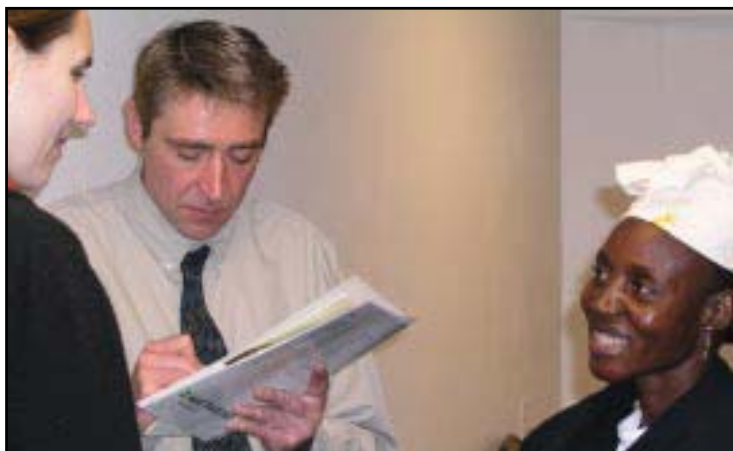


The view from an African farm

Cotton producer Alimata Traoré says firm caps are needed on U.S. crop subsidy payments.

Agricultural subsidies are not a bad thing when used correctly, but uncapped subsidies are harming rural economies both here and abroad, said a West African rural leader during a recent tour of western Minnesota. Madame Alimata Traoré, who is with the Regional Union of Rural Women, visited the area on April 14 as a guest of the Land Stewardship Project and Oxfam America. Traoré spoke at the United Church of Christ in Granite Falls, as well as at the Chippewa County CROP Walk rally in Montevideo.

An affiliate of Oxfam International,



West African farmer Alimata Traoré talked to *West Central Tribune* reporter Tom Cherveney about the negative impacts of crop subsidies. (LSP photo)

the Boston-based Oxfam America is dedicated to finding long-term solutions to poverty, hunger and social injustice around the world.

Traoré, a cotton farmer from the country of Mali, said what amounts to uncapped subsidies paid to large U.S. producers is creating a massive oversupply of cotton. This has reduced the price farmers like Traoré receive to well below the cost of production, she said. That has had a devastating impact in Mali, where over 70 percent of the population is engaged in farming. The loss of income from cotton has forced farmers to leave rural areas to look for work in cities. Because of low cotton prices, parents cannot afford to send their children to school or buy basic necessities. In addition, rural communities are unable to build such basic facilities as health care

centers, causing families to walk many miles to get medical treatment for their children.

"Basically it has cost lives," said Traoré, who spoke through an interpreter.

While in the U.S., the rural leader talked to farmers, politicians and the media about the impact of uncapped subsidies on her community. She said during her time here it has become clear that farm subsidies can be helpful, but that too often the bulk of the money goes to large producers who do not need it. Massive subsidy payments are hurting moderate sized family farmers in this

country as well, Traoré said.

"I've been able to draw a parallel as well about the situation of small farmers here in America," she said. "From talking to them I've noticed that they're suffering from the subsidy program that the United States has right now because small farms are the ones that encounter the most

problems, and they are leaving the countryside as well to go to town."

Audrey Arner, a Montevideo area crop and livestock farmer, said exorbitant subsidy payments for cotton, as well as corn, rice, soybeans and wheat, are slashing the number of farmers on the land, as well as reducing the ecological diversity of the landscape in places like western Minnesota. Commodity payments have averaged about \$15 billion per year recently and are expected to reach \$24 billion in 2005. Currently 8 percent of the U.S. farmers who receive federal farm program payments get 78 percent of the payments, and nearly two-thirds of the farmers don't get any, according to USDA statistics quoted in a recent Associated Press story.

Even modest payment limit reform, such as the payment cap proposed in the

Rural America Preservation Act of 2005, would be a major step in the right direction, said Arner, adding that it would help farm communities both here and in places like Mali. The bill, which would bring the payment cap down from \$360,000 per year to \$250,000, was authored by Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND). Such a cut would save billions of dollars annually and help nutrition programs and conservation initiatives such as the Conservation Security Program, said Arner, who is an LSP member.

"We should cut the waste at the top, while keeping important farm support, nutrition and conservation funding that helps millions of people and society as a whole," she said.

More calls for payment limits

In April, after meeting with LSP Policy Program staff, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Minnesota Catholic Conference, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), and the Lutheran Coalition for Public Policy in Minnesota-ELCA, all called for passage of the Rural America Preservation Act in letters written to key members of Congress.

In addition, Dave Serfling and Carla Johnson co-authored a commentary that called for limiting budget cuts that negatively impact conservation and nutrition programs, and enacting meaningful payment limits in crop subsidy programs. Serfling, a southeast Minnesota crop and livestock farmer, serves on LSP's Federal Farm Policy Committee. Johnson is the Executive Director of Channel One Food Bank and Food Shelf in Rochester, Minn. In late March, LSP and Oxfam America sponsored a series of newspaper and radio advertisements calling for support of payment caps (visit www.landstewardshipproject.org/pr/05/newsr_050329.htm to see and hear the ads). □

For more information on subsidy payment caps, contact Mark Schultz, LSP's Policy Program Director, at 612-722-6377 or marks@landstewardshipproject.org.