

AS NEGOTIATIONS IN CONGRESS BEGIN OVER A NEW FARM BILL, DEBATE WILL FOCUS ON SEVERAL ISSUES CRITICAL TO AMERICAN AGRICULTURE



FIRST UP: SNAP (FOOD STAMP) FUNDING

Since 2020, SNAP participants have received a double monthly payment as part of America's response to the COVID pandemic. However, those second payments are slated to end in April.

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By: Richard M. Blau, Regulated Products Section Chair

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, is a food purchasing assistance program run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and administered at the state level. SNAP benefits are a lifeline for American households that cannot afford healthy food on their current incomes, and the implementation of SNAP has ripple effects for recipients' lives and the economy. The program reduces food insecurity and poverty, and lowers health care costs. Low-income children who live in SNAP households are less likely to fall behind in school as compared to low-income children who do not live in SNAP households.

In 2020, Congress temporarily authorized states to increase payment of SNAP emergency allotments to assist qualifying low-income consumers in coping with wage losses and related problems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Federal funding for those additional SNAP payments has continued to the present.

However, after the February 2023 supplements are issued, the USDA will no longer be authorized to continue COVID-19 emergency SNAP appropriations due to the end of funding under the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2023. As a result, benefits for all SNAP recipients will revert to their pre-enhancement levels by March 2023. In some states, the additional payments already have ended as of this month.

Specifically, supplemental emergency SNAP payments ceased in 17 states as of January 2023. According to the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the following states elected to end the additional SNAP payments early:

Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wyoming.

FNS reports that beginning with the March 2023 benefit month, the supplemental funds will no longer be available in the remaining 32 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Why SNAP is Critical to America

Food prices continue to rise with inflation, according to data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which measures the consumer price index. USDA data estimates that about 6% of the U.S. population, or 19 million people, live in food deserts. Similarly, USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) calculated that 33.8 million American households experienced food insecurity in 2021, or one out of every 10 households. Black (19.8%) and Hispanic (16.2%) households were disproportionately affected, with food insecurity rates more than double the rate of white households (7%).

In addition to food insecurity, Americans are also experiencing alarming rates of chronic conditions, many of which are nutrition-related. More than 40% of U.S. adults and almost 20% of children and adolescents ages 2-19 have obesity, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Currently, 6 in 10 U.S. adults have a chronic condition, many of which are nutrition-related, and 4 in 10 have more than one, including heart disease, some cancers, stroke, or diabetes. These conditions are also costly, as evidenced by a 2019 study finding that unhealthy diets accounted for almost 20% (\$50 billion) of annual U.S. health care costs from heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.

In 2021, more than 41 million Americans participated in SNAP and the program's total cost was more than \$113 billion. Federal nutrition assistance programs, including SNAP, serve one out of every four Americans. Given their broad reach, SNAP and related federal nutrition assistance programs must be accessible by families in need, operate efficiently, and achieve both food and nutrition security. Unfortunately, many families in America still are experiencing food and nutrition security challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, food price inflation, and other issues impacting food accessibility. Congress should consider the health and economic costs of hunger, food insecurity, obesity, and other diet-related diseases as it reauthorizes the Farm Bill or considers other policy changes to federal nutrition programs.

Need for SNAP Restructuring

The scheduled expiration of the emergency increase in SNAP benefits due to the COVID-19 pandemic means the average SNAP participant will lose \$82 per person per month. The change will be even more pronounced for many elderly people who qualify for only the minimum SNAP benefit, and can expect to drop from receiving \$281 per month down to \$23.

The 2023 Farm Bill can provide an opportunity to improve food and nutrition security through federal nutrition assistance programs. Approximately every five years, Congress passes farm bill legislation that governs an array of food and agricultural programs. Although farm bills initially focused on farm commodity revenue supports, the legislation's programs became increasingly expansive in nature, particularly when the nutrition title was first included in 1973.

The most recent farm bill, the \$428 billion Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334), was signed into law in December 2018 and expires on September 30, 2023. The 2018 Farm Bill consisted of 12 titles, including the nutrition title, which reauthorized the programs listed above. The nutrition title composed 76% of total 2018 Farm Bill spending, making it the costliest title by far, with most of the funds going to SNAP. The nutrition title likely will make up 84% of total 2023 Farm Bill spending, reflecting increases in 2022 attributable to COVID-19 pandemic assistance, growth in participation, and adjustments to SNAP benefit calculations.

As the 117th Congress convenes, the U.S. House and Senate Agriculture Committees and their respective subcommittees have started negotiating a new 2023 Farm Bill. While political rancor appears unabated in Washington, D.C., one organization devoted to bipartisan policymaking has ideas on how to improve food nutrition and security in America by using the 2023 Farm Bill to improve the SNAP program in ways that will:

- i. Expand access;
- ii. Reduce costs through improved efficiencies and program integrity; and
- iii. Target support for nutritious foods and away from unhealthy, non-nutritious products proven to jeopardize health.

The 2023 Farm Bill also presents an opportunity to enhance benefits to ensure eligible households can access, afford, and have sufficient knowledge to purchase and prepare a nutritious, balanced diet.

How to Reach Consensus: The Bipartisan Policy Center

The engine behind these ideas is the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), a Washington, D.C.-based think tank comprised of former elected and appointed officials, business and labor leaders, and

academics and advocates representing both sides of the political spectrum. BPC's defines its mission as actively fostering bipartisanship by combining the best ideas from both parties to promote health, security, and opportunity for all Americans.

BPC recently issued a white paper entitled Making Food and Nutrition Security a SNAP: Recommendations for the 2023 Farm Bill. The report was prepared by the BPC's Food and Nutrition Security Task Force, whose leadership includes former USDA Secretaries **Dan Glickman** and **Ann Veneman**, as well as **Leslie Sarasin** (CEO of food industry trade association FMI), **Rochelle Davis** (CEO of Healthy Schools Campaign), **Claire Babineaux-Fontenot** (CEO of Feeding America), **Ihuoma U. Eneli, M.D.** (Director, Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition, Nationwide Children's Hospital), **Pam Schwartz, M.P.H.** (Executive Director, Community Health, Kaiser Permanente), **Dariusz Mozaffarian, M.D., DrPH** (Dean for Policy and Jean Mayer Professor of Nutrition, Friedman School of Nutrition Science & Policy, Tufts University), and **José Andrés** (Founder, World Central Kitchen).

The BPC makes five key policy recommendations and more than 25 sub-recommendations for strengthening SNAP and other federal nutrition assistance programs authorized in the Farm Bill. The recommendations were informed by a stakeholder roundtable, focus groups with former and current SNAP participants, and a nationally representative poll on perspectives on SNAP and potential policy changes. The September 2022 poll, which surveyed 2,210 U.S. adults, including 483 SNAP participants, found support for increased SNAP benefit levels to address a variety of needs, including access to the program for additional population groups, such as college students; opportunities for online grocery purchasing; and pilot programs aimed at incentivizing the purchase of healthful foods. A bipartisan majority of U.S. adults (67%) and a majority of SNAP participants (58%) said that states should be able to operate pilot programs to improve the nutrition of SNAP participants, either freely or with USDA approval. Additionally, more than two-thirds of adults across political parties and more than three-quarters of SNAP participants supported providing additional benefits to SNAP participants for purchasing a range of healthful foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, legumes, and whole grains. A majority of U.S. adults and SNAP participants also favored providing these additional benefits even when conditioned on not purchasing (or with reduced benefits for purchasing) sugar-sweetened beverages.

Five Bipartisan Recommendations for Improving the SNAP Program

With the support of an American majority, the BPC has formulated five core recommendations, which are summarized as follows:

1. *SNAP Eligibility, Benefit Levels, and Program Administration:*

- Ensure that SNAP benefit levels are adequate to achieve a nutritious diet; that eligibility requirements and employment and training programs promote workforce participation

and increased earnings without undue barriers to SNAP participation; and that access to SNAP is expanded across all U.S. territories.

2. *Nutrition and Eligible Foods in SNAP:*

- Strengthen nutrition in SNAP by encouraging the consumption of nutritious foods by establishing a fruit and vegetable cash value benefit (CVB), further expansion of and investment in the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), more robust retailer stocking standards, improvements to the SNAP-Ed program, better data collection, and demonstration projects.

3. *SNAP Integrity, Technology, and Retailer Considerations:*

- Use data matching, online purchasing, and other technology enhancements to improve SNAP access, integrity, efficiency, and operations for participants and retailers.

4. *Food Distribution Programs:*

- Modernize the food distribution programs, including The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), to improve nutrition, program access, and program operations.

5. *Other Food and Nutrition Programs Authorized Through the Farm Bill:*

- Improve food and nutrition security for priority populations through other food and nutrition assistance programs, including the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), Public-Private Partnerships Program, and Micro-Grants for Food Security Program.

Specific details regarding each of these recommendations, as well as for the 25 supporting sub-recommendations proposed by the BPC, currently are accessible online at <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/BPC-Health-Nutrition-Brief-Farm-BillV4.pdf>

CONCLUSION: Why the 2023 Farm Bill Matters

There is no sugar-coating the fact that implementing constructive changes to the SNAP program through the 2023 Farm Bill, whether by adoption of the BPC's recommendations or through approval of similarly prudent proposals, likely will increase federal spending in the near term. However, consider the benefits relative to anticipated declining costs. Current estimates contained in the Congressional Budget Office's *The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2022 to 2032* (available online at <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2022-05/57950-Outlook.pdf>) project a significant

decline in SNAP expenditures over the next decade as the economy recovers, the COVID-19 pandemic recedes, and public health emergency (PHE) flexibilities are lifted.

Consequently, recommendations related to the SNAP program's restructuring and expansion should be considered in the overall context of enhanced economic security, which extends beyond the participants themselves to their local economies, as well as the projected decrease in actual expenditures with improved economic conditions. Long-term improvements in diet quality and nutrition security also would help offset higher spending by reducing costs to the private and public health care sectors. Improving diet quality for all Americans could significantly reduce economic expenses related to diet-related chronic conditions

The 2023 Farm Bill is the best vehicle for achieving constructive improvements to the SNAP program. The legislation is underway now, and it is all but guaranteed to pass in one form or another during this 117th Congress. The BPC's recommendations may not be the only way to address changes to the existing federal SNAP program. Nevertheless, they represent a rational and viable step forward in using the 2023 Farm Bill to help meet America's food access and nutrition security challenges. As such, they deserve due consideration.

This article is the first in a series on the 2023 Farm Bill and its importance to American agriculture, and to all Americans. For more information on the 2023 Farm Bill, or the SNAP program specifically, contact the GrayRobinson National Food Law Team at **866.382.5132** or **foodlaw@gray-robinson.com**.



[Richard M. Blau](#) leads the GrayRobinson [National Food Law Team](#), focusing on the laws that govern the production, importation, processing, marketing, distribution, and sale of foods and beverages throughout the United States. Richard works with all levels of the food industry. He has represented international importers and domestic manufacturers, statewide wholesaler trade groups and regional distributors, and retailers (including multistate restaurant and grocery store chains) across the nation. Richard has achieved numerous peer-related accolades for his legal work, including **Chambers and Partners** – Nationally ranked as "Band 1" for Alcohol Beverage Law & Food Law; **Best Lawyers in America** – Nationally listed for Food and Beverage Law; and **Super Lawyers** – Elected member.