

National Journal

Farm-Bill Conferees Focus on Food-Stamp Fight

Will the federal government really throw millions of hungry people off these benefits?

By: Jerry Hagstrom - November 17, 2013

As farm-bill conferees try to finish their work before the end of the calendar year, they face one overwhelming question: Will the federal government really throw millions of people off food stamps?

The issue is real and differs from the recent expiration of the boost in benefits from the Recovery Act. A family of four receiving more than \$600 per month in food stamps—formally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—lost \$36 in purchasing power. That reduction in benefits is a tiny issue compared with the House's farm-bill proposals that would save \$39 billion over 10 years by causing close to 4 million individuals to lose benefits entirely and 210,000 children to lose free school meals.

The Senate's farm bill would also make eligibility more difficult, but on a much smaller scale. It would deny benefits to lottery winners, crack down on benefits trafficking, and tighten up on eligibility for college students. It would also force states to pay at least \$10 per month in benefits under the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program for SNAP beneficiaries to be able to get higher food-stamp benefits. All of these cuts and changes would theoretically save \$4 billion a year, although House Agriculture Committee ranking member Collin Peterson, D-Minn., has said the states that have been paying as little as \$1 per month in LIHEAP benefits are likely to increase those to \$10 so that people can still get higher SNAP benefits.

The House achieves its big cut by eliminating categorical eligibility—a legal provision under which the states can make it easier for people who get other welfare benefits to qualify for food stamps—and by eliminating states' ability to provide food-stamp benefits to childless unemployed adults for more than three months if they don't get a job.

The National Conference of State Legislatures last week endorsed the Senate version of the nutrition title and opposes the House one because it would increase state administrative costs and program complexity. In the past, that view would have appealed to conservatives because they are against increasing the costs of running state governments, but they seem to have shifted their concern to overall spending.

In endorsing the Senate version, NCSL stands apart from other groups with an interest in food assistance. The big problem with figuring out what will happen to the nutrition title is that neither liberal nor conservative groups seem to want to get involved in the gritty details. Antihunger groups such as the Food Research and Action Center oppose any cuts, while the conservative Cato Institute wants nutrition programs turned over to the state governments. Food companies and retailers—including Wal-

Mart—have so far stayed out of the debate. One food-company executive said the industry is worried about appearing self-serving, but an argument could be made that they should stand up for their customers.

The House Agriculture Committee did not hold any hearings on the nutrition title this year, a point emphasized repeatedly by Peterson and Rep. Marcia Fudge, D-Ohio, the ranking member on the subcommittee in charge of nutrition. Peterson has said that the states have too much flexibility, which has resulted in different standards in different places, but that federal tests of what assets applicants can hold are so strict and out of date that the states ask for waivers from them.

The House provision ending the states' ability to provide food stamps to single, able-bodied adults for more than three months if they don't find jobs is politically popular among conservatives. Yet it is one of the cruelest of provisions. Men make up 60 percent of the single, able-bodied group, according to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. It includes veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, who although they may be technically able-bodied, can have emotional problems or simply can't find jobs in high unemployment areas.

A coalition of 1,300 antihunger charities told conferees last week the House cuts would exceed the total number of meals distributed annually by Feeding America, a national network of food banks.

Antihunger groups hope that President Obama will veto any bill that contains a big food-stamp cut. But relying on the administration is dangerous. President Clinton agreed reluctantly to a big cut to food stamps in the 1996 welfare-reform bill, and Obama and Congress twice moved up the expiration date on the Recovery Act boost so that the budget authority could be used to keep teachers on the job and provide money for healthier school meals.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said last week that the bill should force the states to be more accountable in their use of the \$350 million to \$400 million in federal aid they receive annually to help SNAP beneficiaries get training and land jobs. Vilsack said he agrees with conservatives that the goal should be getting people off food stamps, but that the way to do it is to help them find jobs rather than take them off benefits first.

Vilsack said USDA's technical staff is in "constant contact" with Capitol Hill. Let's hope that people who run SNAP advise Congress on how to cut it—and that all concerned remember there is a difference between cutting benefits and cutting hungry people off entirely.