



Food-stamp recipients won't feel funding cuts

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WASHINGTON – The farm bill signed Feb. 7 by President Barack Obama includes \$8 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, but experts say the cuts will not affect food-stamp benefits in Arizona.

That was little comfort to advocates who worry about the long-term impact on the 1.1 million food-stamp recipients in Arizona, and the immediate impact to low-income families in those states that will see cuts to benefits.

“I understand it was based on compromise,” said Amanda Lee, spokeswoman for the Arizona Community Action Association, of the farm bill. “It could have been worse and it may seem reasonable, but it will still hurt families.”

Advocates note that food-stamp funding was just reduced in November. They worry that the cuts in the farm bill are part of an alarming trend that will continue “balancing the budget on the backs of SNAP recipients,” in the words of Angie Rodgers, CEO of the Association of Arizona Food Banks.

But more cuts are just what is needed, according to critics, who say the current bill did not go far enough.

“The food stamp cut was just 1 percent of the \$80 billion program. That’s after the program quadrupled in cost over the last decade from about \$20 billion,” Chris Edwards, an economist at the Cato Institute, said in an emailed statement.

“So a much larger cut was in order from my perspective,” Edwards said.

The farm bill – almost 1,000 pages long and costing almost \$1 trillion over the next 10 years, according to the Congressional Budget Office – includes funding for forests, farms and rural development, among other programs. But the largest part of the bill is SNAP, or the food-stamp program.

A House-passed version of the bill would have cut SNAP by about \$39 billion, the CBO said, while the Senate version would have cut about \$4 billion. The final bill set the cuts at \$8 billion for 10 years, starting with \$84 million in 2014.

But the cuts will only be felt immediately by food stamp recipients in those states that tie SNAP to energy subsidies for low-income families – the “heat and eat” program.

“It’s a crackdown on the ‘heat and eat’ program that is in many states, but not Arizona,” Lee said.

Even though the cuts will not directly affect Arizonans, Rodgers emphasized in a prepared statement that SNAP is an effective tool that she said has reduced poverty by 4.4 percent across the country. She sees the latest cut as part of a trend that has already hurt Arizona recipients and could hurt them again.

“We already had a major cut last November that averaged \$26 per recipient family,” Rodgers said. “I doubt Arizonans elected anything like this with their votes.”

Lee said many Arizona families continue to struggle with hunger, with 1.1 million state residents on food stamps. She is concerned that November’s cuts will not be the last, and that the farm bill cuts will continue a narrative that encourages future cuts.

That was echoed by Feeding America spokesman Ross Fraser, who referred to the “mentality of taking food stamps for granted and associating them as a burden on society.” That will be reinforced in a way that may come back to haunt Arizonans later, he said.

But for now, the cuts will not be felt by people getting food stamps in the state.

“The only way Arizona’s food stamps could even remotely be affected is based upon performance bonuses that Arizona could receive from SNAP,” said Melissa Loeb, senior policy analyst at Federal Funds Information for States.

But Arizona has not received such a performance bonus in recent years, she said, and even if it did, the farm bill would only put stricter limits on how the bonus money was spent.

“The use of those funds would be limited to improvements in technology, administration, or actions to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse,” Loeb said.