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## Surplus U.S. catfish a tasty bipartisan item in Washington

By: Deborah Zabarenko - July 4, 2013

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The Department of Agriculture is spending \$10 million on frozen catfish for poor Americans this year as part of a Great Depression-era program that hasn't drawn a peep of protest from budget slashers in Congress.

The program, which is buying 12 million catfish portions along with vast amounts of other foods such as frozen blueberries and chicken drumsticks, is the rare government initiative that seems to have only friends in bitterly partisan Washington.

Under the Emergency Food Assistance Program, USDA will spend about \$275 million this year on surplus food generated by U.S. farmers, about a quarter of 1 percent of the agency's \$100 billion annual budget.

The farmers are happy because it takes surplus food off their hands at respectable prices. Advocates for the poor support it because it offers a convenient way to feed the hungry, including some who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

"There's nothing much bad to say about it," said Daniel Sumner, an agriculture issues expert at the University of California, Davis, in a telephone interview.

Ben Pentecost, president of Catfish Farmers of America and a catfish farmer himself in Doddsville, Miss., said TEFAP helps offset rising feed prices and less expensive foreign competition.

"The way I look at it, USDA's getting a good product at what should be a fair price. It's not a giveaway program," he said.

Parts of the program have changed over the years, but some aspects never change, according to a USDA expert who was not authorized to be quoted by name.

"The program always helps alleviate hunger and improve school meals by offering safe, nutritious and 100-percent American-grown food," the expert said.

The program's relatively low cost may have shielded it from criticism. Farm subsidy expert Sallie James of the libertarian Cato Institute thinks the government should not allow commodities groups such as TEFAP to set prices for surplus foods.

But when she looks at the USDA's total spending, she says it wouldn't be the first program she would cut.

The catfish will be stored along with other commodities in warehouses maintained by local food banks, like a 100,000-square-foot building three miles from the U.S. Capitol.

The facility, stacked with supplies obtained through TEFAP and other sources, allows the Capital Area Food Bank to provide food to about 450,000 people in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia.

TEFAP, which began in 1935, is wrapped in less red tape than the federal food stamp program. Families who need emergency food supplies do not have to formally apply and may self-certify - declare their income without independent confirmation -- at a local food bank where they pick up supplies.

A Washington family of four can earn up to \$43,650 a year and qualify for help from TEFAP, far more than the \$19,000 annual income cutoff for food stamps, said Brian Banks of the Capital Area Food Bank.

High prices for agricultural products have put strains on the surplus food program, so TEFAP foods now make up less of the total amount that food banks and pantries distribute, said Carrie Calvert, a policy expert at Feeding America, a network of U.S. food banks.

Sumner said that with food stamp demand rising, and with Congress slashing budgets, more hungry people would likely fall through social safety net holes without programs like TEFAP.

The frozen catfish promise to be a popular item.

Protein items are extremely hard to get, so any time there are meat or fish purchases, it's always an item that is highly sought after and moves extremely quickly through the food system," Calvert said.

Pentecost, who has seen many small catfish farming operations go under in recent years, said the program won't necessarily keep the industry afloat.

But "any sale is a sale that moves product ... . We appreciate any help we can get," he said.