



# SNAP Debate Likely to Grow Contentious

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More than 20 percent of the population in seven states and the District of Columbia received some form of food aid in 2013 under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, according to a recent Department of Agriculture report.

Mississippi, New Mexico, Tennessee, Oregon, Kentucky, Louisiana, Georgia and D.C. all have poverty rates above the national rate of 15.9 percent, with Mississippi and New Mexico with the highest shares of people living below the poverty line.

Farm bill conferees will debate the value of SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, in the coming weeks as they work to produce a compromise measure — and it likely will be one of the most contentious issues that conferees tackle. President Barack Obama [recently named the farm bill as one of three major priorities for Congress](#), along with the budget and immigration, and he urged that the bill be “one that protects vulnerable children and adults in times of need.”

Supporters of SNAP will argue that the record enrollment levels reflect the difficulty low-income people face in finding work in a slowly recovering economy with a soft job market.

They will cite analysis by advocacy groups such as the Food Research and Action Center and research groups such as the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities to bolster arguments that the monthly benefits have helped to lift several million people out of poverty. Senate Agriculture Chairwoman [Debbie Stabenow](#) will be a vocal opponent of the nearly \$40 billion in SNAP cuts over 10 years proposed in the House farm bill ([HR 2642](#)). The Senate bill calls for \$4 billion in cuts over 10 years.

But other conferees, particularly Rep. [Steve Southerland II](#), will argue that the 135 percent increase in the program costs from 2007 to 2011 indicates a need for fundamental changes. Southerland, a Florida Republican whose provisions in the House bill provide incentives to states to adopt work requirements similar to those in the smaller federal welfare program, argues that SNAP and other social welfare programs encourage dependency.

In a floor statement last month, Southerland said SNAP work requirements are lax.

“What we have done in this country is wrong. We have failed in introducing the blessing of work to able-bodied people who have the ability, who are mentally, physically, psychologically able to work, and we have robbed them of knowing a better life that they helped create for themselves and their families,” Southerland said.

He and other proponents of revamping SNAP also have research groups to cite. The Heritage Foundation has advocated for converting SNAP into a block grant similar to funding for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the federal welfare program. Heritage argues that states would make wiser use of the funds, which would be largely frozen. States would be rewarded for emphasizing work in return for benefits. Conferees may also draw on an October report by Michael D. Tanner of the Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank, who acknowledges that SNAP may have lifted some people out of poverty but not enough to justify an annual cost of more than \$70 billion a year.