

Bloomberg Government

Food-Stamp Limits Emerge on Republican Wish List for Farm Bill

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March 13, 2023

Congressional Republicans, bidding to cut domestic spending, are offering proposals to reduce participation in the federal government's largest nutrition program.

The maximum age to be bound to federal work requirements in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, would jump to 65, from 49, in a bill Rep. Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.) will introduce Tuesday.

Johnson's proposal is stricter than a similar effort, S. 39, from Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.), who wants to raise the age to 59 for SNAP work requirements. Politico first reported Johnson's proposal.

Both bills come amid a Republican push to tighten work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents. Such adults can receive SNAP benefits for only three months without being employed or in some sort of education or training program. Under current requirements, these adults are between 18 and 49 years old. The new legislative proposals would broaden that age range.

Johnson's bill signals mainstream Republicans are moving to tighten SNAP eligibility as part of this year's rewrite of the five-year farm bill. The nutrition title, which makes up more than 80% of the legislation, has started partisan battles in past farm bills, causing substantial delays. Democrats continue to oppose efforts to cut SNAP, and Senate leaders have ruled out reductions to the program.

Johnson's bill has 17 cosponsors as of Monday, according to his office, including fellow House Agriculture Committee Reps. Randy Feenstra (R-Iowa) and Lori Chavez-DeRemer (R-Ore.).

“They’re probably trying to prioritize fiscal savings,” said Liza Lieberman, vice president of communications at MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, of the Republican push to restrict food stamps. The anti-hunger group is concerned about these SNAP bills and work requirements in general, she said, pointing to [studies](#) that show work-related time limits don’t meaningfully increase employment.

A Five-Year Difference

Reps. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) and Andy Biggs (R-Ariz.) want to link [cutbacks in SNAP](#) to broader domestic reductions as Congress confronts the need to raise the nation’s debt limit. But members of the House Agriculture Committee such as Johnson, who leads the more moderate Main Street Caucus, have stuck to specific policy changes in the forthcoming farm bill that could remove some recipients from the SNAP rolls.

Republicans pushing the SNAP changes and critics of them are both likely overestimating the impact of the age-range change, said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the right-leaning Cato Institute.

“The devil’s in the details,” Tanner said. Adults in the 49-65 age group are less likely than younger Americans to fit under the “able-bodied” category because of age-related complications, he said.

The 65-year-old age cap makes less sense than Scott’s 59-year one, Tanner said, because a 59-year-old may have an easier time finding work than an older person. More than 28% of SNAP recipient households contained an elderly individual in 2020, according to the most recent Agriculture Department [data](#).

Johnson and other Republicans attempted in the 2018 farm bill to cut down on states’ ability to waive federal work requirements for reasons such as low employment opportunity. “Everyone who can work, should work,” Johnson said at the time. His bill to be released Tuesday would pose stricter rules on when states are able to get exemptions from the three-month time limit.

Lieberman said the discrepancy between different GOP bills on the same topic shows “disconnect” in the party and points to an “arbitrary” process for setting these age limits. On the other side of the aisle, some House Democrats want to eliminate work requirements for SNAP altogether — foreshadowing likely partisan fights in this year’s farm bill.

“We’ve long wanted to eliminate the time limit entirely,” Ellen Vollinger, SNAP director for the Food Research & Advocacy Center, said of the three-month cap for unemployed adults receiving benefits. “We would never support making it an even harsher, less realistic provision.”