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## Jobs galore in Texas, yet food program continues like it's a recession

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Texas' unemployment rate, hovering around 4 percent for the past eight months, is the lowest it has been in 40 years. In April, the state created more jobs — 39,600 — than any other in the country.

Unlike the robust economic recovery, the state's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is still stuck in the recession.

Last month, the state spent more than \$416 million to provide food stipends to nearly 3.7 million people, according to data analyzed by The Texas Monitor. In the late recession month of November, 2011, when the unemployment rate was nearly twice what it is today, SNAP served a little more than 3.7 million people and spent roughly \$452 million.

The second largest SNAP program in the country will spend more than \$5 billion this year. Nationally, it spent \$68 billion in 2017, down considerably from a record \$79.9 billion in 2013, but roughly four times what it was spending in 2000 when spending went on a 13-year climb, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

And while the numbers of people receiving SNAP benefits has receded from 47.6 million in that record year of 2013, 42.1 million is two and a half times what the SNAP rolls carried at the turn of the century.

But when the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, U.S. Rep. Mike Conaway, R-Texas, insisted the House version of the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 include a return to requiring SNAP recipients to work or to join a job training program, something President Donald Trump has said he supports, all political hell broke loose.

When the Congressional Budget Office estimated SNAP benefits would drop by more than \$20 billion over the next 10 years, the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities said as many as two million people would get tossed out of the program. Another left-leaning think tank, the Urban Institute, estimated that more than 5.2 million SNAP recipients would have to violate the law because of their current work situations.

The Texas Monitor contacted Celia Cole, CEO for Feeding Texas, a statewide hunger non-profit, for comment, but she did not return the call before this story was published.

“Taking basic services away from Texans who are working towards better lives isn't a responsible way to deal with their economic problems, or our nation's,” Cole wrote in a recent op-ed. “Work requires fuel, and hunger never helped anyone find a job.”

The bill failed in the House by a vote of 213 to 198 last month. When the Senate Agriculture Committee passed its version of the bill this week, SNAP reform was notably absent. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said before either committee vote that he'd be comfortable passing a bill that had no SNAP work requirement.

Taken on its own, experts say a lack of political courage is likely to mean a missed opportunity to wean people off of a program that is just one of two dozen state and federal food programs available to low income people.

As far back as its boom year in 2013, the Harvard School of Public Health provided data showing that SNAP failed in its primary mission to make sure at-risk people were well fed.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, came to the same conclusions. More than half of SNAP recipients have been receiving benefits for five years or more, from a program created as an emergency food program, Tanner told The Texas Monitor Thursday.

And resisting all efforts to return to a more modest model is a longstanding coalition of farm state Republicans whose constituents benefit from the program as producers and urban Democrats, some of whose supporters receive the benefit, Tanner said.

“To some degree you could understand the need during the recession, but you saw the program doubling under George W. Bush and again with Barack Obama,” Tanner said. “What you’ve had is a kind of permanent ratcheting up.”

Despite the fact that SNAP’s roughly \$70 billion budget makes up about 80 percent of the \$87 billion farm bill funding, Tanner said it is a mistake to assess the program in isolation.

“To some degree, the optics are questionable,” Tanner said. “Conservatives should be asked to account for the part of the farm bill that can rightly be seen as an expansion of welfare for farmers.”

Opponents have been effective in asking taxpayers how they can demand SNAP reform and turn a blind eye to years of farm subsidies. Just in time for the House and Senate Agriculture Committee debates, the Environmental Working Group, which has long kept track of federal farm subsidies, issued a new report saying the federal government has handed out more than \$19.2 billion to 27,930 farmers between 1985 and 2016.

The report zeroed in on Texas, whose farmers got \$1.59 billion in subsidies in 2016 alone — the most of any other state — and on Conaway whose district received \$2.4 billion for 725 farmers between 1995 to 2016.

Jodey Arrington, R-TX, is another member of the House Agriculture Committee who has stumped hard for SNAP reform. Farmers in his Panhandle district netted \$8 billion in subsidies during the same time period, according to the EWG data.

And another member of the House Agriculture Committee and SNAP reform proponent, Rep. Vicky Hartzler, R-Missouri, has accepted nearly \$1 million in subsidies for her own family farm.

“It’s simply irresponsible to be advocating for policies that kick the poorest Americans off anti-hunger programs while simultaneously creating new farm subsidy loopholes for millionaires and billionaires,” Scott Faber, vice president of government affairs for EWG, recently told the Texas Observer.

These critics “are conflating two very different things” in equating farm subsidies and the SNAP program, Rachel Millard, communications director for the House Agriculture Committee, told The Texas Monitor Thursday.

Farm subsidies, Millard said, are made available to farmers to compete in tougher economic times with more heavily subsidized farmers in other countries. Congress considers the protection of the American food supply a matter of “national security,” she said.

The bill the House will vote again on sometime late next week will again include the work requirement backed by \$1 billion for states to beef up their employment training programs for SNAP recipients.

The bill would extend by 10 years the requirement that healthy adults ages 18 to 49, with no dependents either work 20 hours per week or get 20 hours a week of training to receive benefits.

“It’s in keeping with the original intent of the program, which was supposed to be part of a social safety net and a lift up and out of poverty,” Millard said. “That includes employment. We think we’re investing in this in a very real and meaningful way.”

The Senate vote sometime next week will be an indicator, but Millard said she remains optimistic that real and meaningful SNAP reform can happen.

“We’re going into this with our eyes wide open,” she said. “It’s obviously going to be a challenge.”