

Roll Call

It's Time to Rein In the Growth of Food Stamps

By Michael Tanner

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You recall the great American famine of 2010, don't you? Neither do I, but the outcry surrounding proposals by House Republicans to cut spending on food stamps back to slightly higher than 2010 levels suggests that there surely must have been one.

The debate over spending will be hashed out by the conference committee seeking to reconcile House and Senate versions of the farm bill as it meets over the next couple of weeks.

The farm bill itself is a monstrous giveaway to agribusiness interests and should be allowed to die a well-deserved death — but it won't be. Therefore much of the drama will focus on funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which the House wants to cut by \$39 billion over 10 years, while the Senate would trim the program by just \$4.1 billion over the same period.

Before we hear too much about heartless tea party Republicans, let's recall that as recently as 2000, this was a program that cost just \$18 billion and covered just 17 million Americans. Today, more than 48 million Americans receive food stamps at a cost of \$78 billion. Republicans aren't exaggerating when they say SNAP is one of this country's fastest-growing social-welfare programs. It is. And today, nearly 1 out of every 6 Americans receives SNAP benefits.

Of course, some of this increase was undoubtedly countercyclical, brought about by the recent recession. Yet, SNAP growth started under the Bush administration, well before the start of the economic downturn, increased more rapidly during this recession than in previous recessions, and is projected to remain at record levels despite the economic recovery.

All this suggests that much of the program's growth is due to deliberate policy decisions rather than the economy. That's a conclusion even the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office agrees with. According to the CBO, 35 percent of the program's growth from 2007 to 2011 was caused by non-economic factors.

Even after Republicans finish “gutting” the program, spending from 2013 to 2023 will average \$73.5 billion annually, nearly \$5 billion more than the program spent in 2010.

If you were to listen to Sen. [Debbie Stabenow](#), D-Mich., who chairs the Senate Agriculture Committee, you’d think that even at higher levels than in 2010, Republicans were trying to reduce SNAP costs in a deliberate “attempt to kick millions of families in need off of food assistance.”

But House Republicans aren’t mindlessly slashing the program across the board. Nearly all the proposed cuts result from closing loopholes and restoring traditional eligibility standards.

For example, House Republicans would eliminate most state waivers from the program’s work requirements and restrict “categorical eligibility,” which enables recipients to avoid some of the program’s eligibility requirements.

It’s important to remember that as part of the stimulus program in 2009, Congress made it far easier for people to qualify for and stay on SNAP. Because of those changes, many families don’t even have to meet income requirements to receive assistance, which is why almost 17 percent of SNAP households have incomes above the poverty line.

So what these “draconian” Republican cuts turn out to be are pretty modest steps toward reform in a program that has been growing at an unsustainable rate for the past decade.

The worst part is that no one is really sure how effective the SNAP program is. That’s right: The academic evidence is quite mixed about its effectiveness in either combatting hunger or improving nutrition. Even the Government Accountability Office concedes that the “literature is inconclusive as to whether SNAP alleviates hunger and malnutrition for low-income households.” That means we are currently throwing almost \$80 billion a year at a program with nothing more than good intentions to show for our efforts.

The conference committee provides an important opportunity to debate food stamp reform. Let’s hope it can be done with a bit more attention to the facts and a bit less hysteria.