



Why Is SNAP Part of the Farm Bill?

by Joel Berg -- June 28, 2013



[A long line of jobless and homeless men wait outside to get free dinner at New York's Municipal Lodging House in the winter of 1932-33 during the Great Depression](#)

During the Great Depression, Americans foraged through garbage cans for food and dug in public parks to find roots they could eat. Parents reluctantly sent their children door-to-door to beg. Ninety-five people were admitted to New York City's four largest hospitals due to starvation in 1931. Twenty of them died. That same year, the Municipal Lodging House for the homeless provided 408,100 lodgings and 1,024,247 meals. A year later, in 1932, it provided 889,984 lodgings and 2,688,266 meals, at a time when the entire New York City population was only 6.9 million people.

Relief agencies nationwide lost their ability to prevent starvation. Local governments, expected to fund relief efforts themselves, began running out of money to do so. In May 1932, the average relief grant in Philadelphia (out of which people were expected to pay for food and all other basic expenses) was cut to \$4.32 per family per week, equaling about \$62 per week in today's money. In New York City, the average

weekly relief grant fell to \$2.39 (about \$35 in today's money). Baltimore gave needy families an average of 80 cents and Atlanta provided 60 cents per week for whites and less for blacks.

The nation was near the point of revolution. At times, armed men would go into stores in large groups to demand credit and, when refused, take food anyway. The term "food riot" became popular in the press.

Adding fuel to the fire was the country's glut of unused food. Neither farmers nor factory workers had the money to buy each others' products. Oklahoma union activist and editor Oscar Ameringer wrote: "The farmers are being pauperized by the poverty of the industrial populations and the industrial populations are being pauperized by the poverty of the farmers."

Today it seems obvious to most of us that government should have purchased some of the excess agricultural products and distributed them to the hungry, but at the time, opposition to government involvement in social welfare, as well as the belief in the unlimited abilities of American charities, was deeply ingrained in American thought. The idea of the government buying food and distributing it for free seemed radical, particularly to the Republicans in charge of the nation. In 1931, when Democratic leader William McAdoo suggested that surplus wheat be distributed to the unemployed, President Herbert Hoover rejected the idea, saying, "I am confident that the hungry and unemployed will be cared for by our sense of voluntary organization and community service." Ironically, Hoover had first become nationally known in America for his effective leadership in providing aid to starving Europeans following World War I, but he couldn't accept the reality that his beloved United States needed that same type of help.

As America's crisis worsened, Hoover would not budge in his opposition to domestic relief. In a 1932 speech, he decried government aid, saying: "A cold and distant charity which puts out its sympathy only through the tax collector yields only a meager dole of unloving and perfunctory relief." He was clearly blind to the fact that millions of Americans on the verge of starvation would have been grateful for any sort of food aid, no matter how unloving and perfunctory. Two days before the election of 1932, which he lost in a landslide to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Hoover declared himself unable to "find a single locality where people are being deprived of food or shelter."

Hoover was the nation's first significant right-wing hunger denier. It is no wonder a conservative think tank, the Hoover Institution, is named after him. But he was not alone in his opposition to government food aid. Wealthy people who dominated the boards of charities complained that providing food aid would promote dependency and that private charity was more efficient than government aid. Even progressive social workers believed that food aid "was an antiquated form of relief, inconsistent with modern social work practice and the dignity of the client."

Yet the severity of the crisis eventually sunk in for many of our nation's leaders, and necessity trumped ideology, as even staunch Republican Congressman Hamilton Fish supported a proposal to have the government buy excess wheat for distribution to the poor, saying, "It is a disgrace and an outrage that this country of ours, with overabundance of food stuffs, should permit millions of our own people to continue to be undernourished and hungry." Citing instances in which Congress had aided the victims of

disasters abroad, Fish argued that the “first function of government is to take care of its own people in time of great emergency.” Permitting people to starve, he declared, was “creating a hotbed for communism.”

When Roosevelt took office, the controversy over whether to support food aid versus other kinds of aid remained unsettled. His agriculture department received widespread and withering criticism for slaughtering and then discarding hogs in order to reduce supply. In response, FDR ordered the department to start distributing the meat to the hungry.

Today’s liberals tend to forget that FDR repeatedly opposed giving out free money and food without requiring work (especially when they blasted Bill Clinton for supposedly betraying the New Deal tradition by supporting welfare reform). Roosevelt said direct relief was “a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit.” Instead of continuing to sponsor a “spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber,” he said, the government must find work for those in need and able to work. “We must preserve not only the bodies of the employed from destruction but also their self-respect, their self-reliance and courage and determination. Therefore, the Federal government must and shall quit this business of relief.”

A pragmatist who sometimes contradicted himself in order to solve pressing national problems, Roosevelt also significantly expanded the efforts — begun in the previous administration, against Hoover’s will — to distribute free commodities to low-income Americans. FDR included other goods in addition to wheat and significantly increased the volume of surplus food purchased and distributed by the federal government.

FDR also supported creation of the first Food Stamp Program, in 1938. The program operated by permitting people on relief to buy orange stamps equal to their normal food expenditures; for every one dollar worth of orange stamps purchased, 50 cents worth of blue stamps were received. Orange stamps could be used to buy any food; blue stamps could only be used to buy food determined by the Department of Agriculture to be surplus. Over the course of nearly four years, the program reached approximately 20 million people in nearly half of the nation’s counties, and cost a total of \$262 million (about three billion dollars in 2006 dollars).

So that is the story of how food aid was tied to farm aid from the start. Today, though many rural and suburban people rely on federal nutrition assistance programs (such as SNAP), they’re perceived as urban programs. Thus, they’ve remained in Farm Bills in order to try to win votes from urban members of Congress. House Republicans now want to separate SNAP from the Farm Bill in order to make it easier to make cuts.

In my opinion, farm bills should be classified as “food bills” and SNAP should continue to be part of them. Food producers and consumers are mutually dependent upon each other. When so many Americans are low-income and hungry or food insecure, that limits the amount of money they can spend on food, thus limiting income for food producers. When producers can’t afford to stay on their land or face environmental threats, it threatens the availability of nutritious, fresh food for New York consumers. A true food bill would aid hungry Americans and small family farmers alike.

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