

Democrats, Republicans reach deal to slash \$8.7 billion from food stamp program

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US House and Senate negotiators announced a deal Monday to slash \$8.7 billion from food stamps, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides food assistance to 48 million people in the United States.

The cuts are part of the so-called farm bill, a five-year omnibus measure that deals with programs administered by the US Department of Agriculture. A vote on the bill is scheduled in the House on Wednesday, and the lead negotiators for both parties said it is likely to sail through both houses of congress and be quickly signed by President Obama.

For the second time in two weeks, Congress will vote on a sweeping and draconian austerity bill that most of its members will not have had time to read, and of which the public will have even less understanding. Earlier this month, Congress voted on a budget deal that within days of its official release made permanent most of last year's sequester cuts.

The bill's \$8.7 billion in food stamp cuts will slash these benefits by \$90 a month for 850,000 of the nation's poorest families over the course of 10 years. Most of these cuts will be implemented by eliminating what the deal's supporters call, in Orwellian language, a "loophole," through which families eligible for home heating aid received extra food assistance.

"They're calling it a loophole, but it's taking away real money from real families," Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, told CNN. He added, "They are gutting a program to provide food for hungry people."

Congressional Democrats could barely contain their enthusiasm in praising a bill that will throw almost a million poor families into destitution. "This bill proves that by working across party lines we can reform programs to save taxpayer money while strengthening

efforts to grow our economy," said Michigan Democrat Debbie Stabenow, who chairs the Senate Agriculture Committee.

She added that the deal "puts us on the verge of enacting a five-year farm bill that saves taxpayers billions, eliminates unnecessary subsidies, creates a more effective farm safety net and helps farmers and businesses create jobs."

Democrat Steny Hoyer, the house Minority Whip, said that the party would line up behind the bill, telling the *Hill* newspaper, "We think there will be a significant number of Democrats [voting yes]."

The agribusiness lobby likewise signaled its support for the proposal, with Ray Gaesser, president of the American Soybean Association, saying that the deal "ensures the continued success of American agriculture." He added, "We encourage both the House and the Senate to pass it quickly."

One in seven Americans receives food stamp assistance, up from 9 percent of the population in 2008 to nearly 15 percent in 2012. The program helps feed 48 million people, up from 26 million in 2007. According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), three quarters of households who receive SNAP benefits "included a child, a person age 60 or older, or a disabled person."

The bill comes on top of a previous cut to food stamp benefits in November, which slashed food assistance by \$319 per year for a typical family of three, totaling \$11 billion through 2016.

In addition to cutting food aid for recipients of home heating assistance, the deal further tightens food stamp eligibility restrictions and prohibits the US Department of Agriculture from publicizing the food stamp program to poor families who may not know of its existence.

Currently, people convicted for drug-related felonies are permanently barred from receiving food stamp benefits. The bill expands the ban to a broader range of felonies, including murder and sexual assault. Additionally, the deal would launch pilot programs in ten states that would require food stamp recipients to be actively looking for work. According to some newspaper reports, the proposal would also prevent college students from receiving food stamp aid.

In addition to food stamp cuts, the bill slashes \$6 billion in spending by cutting almost in half the number of environmental conservation programs run by the Department of Agriculture. The deal also cuts about \$19 billion in farm programs, including ending direct payments to farmers, in favor of expanded crop insurance programs.

Over 80 percent of SNAP benefits go to households with incomes below the federal poverty line, an abysmally low \$19,530 annually for a family of three, and 40 percent of recipients live in deep poverty, defined as below \$9,765 annually for a family of three.

The share of food stamp recipients who are working has risen significantly. Nearly one third of SNAP recipients were working in 2010, up from less than 20 percent two decades ago. Moreover, for the first time in history, more than half of US households receiving food stamps have been headed by working age adults, between the ages of 18 to 59, according to figures reported this week by the Associated Press.

The vast majority of food stamp recipients who do not work are disabled, elderly or underage. The number of people who receive food stamps will continue to rise through 2014, according to CBO projections.

Over 21 million children—more than one in four—live in a household that receives food stamp benefits, according to a Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report, and 9 million people with disabilities receive food stamps.

The support given to these draconian cuts to food assistance by both the White House and Congressional Democrats gives the lie to the Obama administration's recent campaign to present itself as an opponent of social inequality. In reality, this administration is carrying out the most sweeping assault on anti-poverty programs in history, spelling destitution for millions of people.



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