

US Senate votes to slash \$8.7 billion in food assistance

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The US Senate voted Tuesday to pass \$8.7 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps, as part of a package of agricultural legislation.

The Senate vote follows the bill's passage in the House of Representatives last Wednesday. President Barack Obama is expected to sign it by the end of the week. Twenty-two Republicans joined 46 members of the Senate Democratic caucus to vote for the bill, while 23 Republicans and nine Democrats voted against it.

In a statement following the vote, the White House came out unequivocally in support of the measure, which will slash food benefits for 1.7 million of the most vulnerable Americans, including large numbers of children and disabled people, stating:

"Today, in a strong bipartisan vote, the US Senate came together to pass a comprehensive Farm Bill—legislation that will build on the historic economic gains in rural America over the past five years, create new jobs and opportunities, and protect the most vulnerable Americans."

The White House added that the bill "will continue reducing our deficits without gutting the vital assistance programs millions of hardworking Americans count on to help put food on the table for their families."

The only mildly critical note in the White House's statement was that the farm bill "isn't perfect." But the White House concluded that the legislation "will make a positive difference not only for the rural economies that grow America's food, but for our nation."

The bipartisan support for slashing one of the few programs aimed at alleviating widespread poverty and hunger in the United States comes amidst record social inequality. With the support of the Obama administration, tens of billions of dollars are handed to the banks every month through the money-printing

operations of the Federal Reserve. The annual cuts in food stamps, which will have such devastating social consequences, amount to only 0.04 percent of the total wealth of the richest 400 individuals in the country.

The bill's cuts to food stamps come in the form of a sharp curtailment in the "heat and eat" program, which automatically increases food stamp benefits to families that receive home heating assistance. Instead of increasing food stamp benefits after the first dollar of home heating aid, the farm bill will require families to receive \$20 in home heating assistance before they receive additional food aid.

As a result, 850,000 households, or 1.7 million people in sixteen states, will receive food stamp cuts averaging \$90 per month, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The average SNAP payment per household last year was \$287, or \$4.30 per person per day.

The passage of the bill received scant attention in the media, while some newspapers openly praised the cuts. An editorial posted Sunday on the web site of *USA Today*, entitled "Food stamp's heat-and-eat scam." The newspaper sought to draw a parallel between destitute people receiving less than \$5 a day in food stamps and wealthy tax evaders.

The editors called the program, a "trick" and a "gimmick" set up by "clever state officials" to provide extra emergency food assistance that "citizens aren't really entitled to under the rules." The editorial is a sophisticated justification for slashing food stamp benefits even as hunger reaches unprecedented levels.

According to the US Conference of Mayors, demand for emergency food assistance in 25 major cities increased seven percent in 2013, following increases of 22, 15, and 24 percent in 2012, 2011, and 2010, respectively. One in six households, or nearly 18

million people, is considered “food insecure” by the US Department of Agriculture.

The latest round of cuts comes on top of a previous cut in November that slashed food assistance by \$319 per year for a typical family of three, totaling \$11 billion through 2016. The annual reduction to food stamp benefits implemented in November is larger than the operating budget of all the Feeding America member agencies, which include most of the food banks in the country.

The combination of growing need for food assistance and sharp cutbacks in food stamps has created a vast shortage of food aid, with food pantries throughout the country reporting having to turn hungry people away because food was not available.

“The high cost of heat this winter due to prolonged and brutal cold spells will strain many household budgets and send more people to food pantries, soup kitchens and other emergency-food charities,” said Bob Aiken, CEO of Feeding America in a statement last month. “This spike in heating costs will make life even more difficult for the 47 million Americans who are losing \$5 billion in food stamp benefits in fiscal year 2014.”

This winter is the coldest in decades in the US. Record low temperatures have been set in dozens of cities throughout the country, driving up heating and electricity bills. Making matters worse, gas prices are predicted to be 14 percent higher this winter than they were last year.

“When heating costs go up, it is often difficult for low-income families to put food on the table. They often must turn to their local Feeding America food banks, many of which will face a drop in donations following the holidays,” Aiken said.

Several states have carried out even more draconian attacks on food stamp recipients. Eight states have adopted new work requirements. The Georgia state legislature is currently considering a bill that would force food stamp recipients to undergo mandatory drug testing.

The cuts to food stamp benefits included in the farm bill are only the latest in a wave of sweeping cutbacks in federal social programs. In December, emergency extended jobless benefits expired for 1.3 million long-term unemployed workers in the US, with another 3.6 million people expected to exhaust their state jobless

pay during the course of 2014. Also in December, congressional Democrats and Republicans reached an agreement on a budget that will leave in place over a trillion dollars in sequester cuts over 10 years, while slashing the retirement benefits of federal workers and imposing regressive consumption taxes.



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