

Republicans target food stamp benefits in new farm bill

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As lawmakers return to the capital after a spring recess, Republicans are preparing to release a new five-year farm bill that would impose tougher requirements for eligibility for food stamps, officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The farm bill is a nearly \$1 trillion piece of legislation that includes provisions for crop insurance, conservation programs, and commodity price and income support programs for the agriculture industry. But the vast majority of its funding is allocated for food stamps. In the 2014 bill, SNAP's 10-year cost was \$756 billion, or 80 percent of the entire \$956 billion bill.

Republicans on the House Agriculture Committee are proposing to add further work requirements to SNAP. Under the current proposal, adults between the ages of 18 and 65, who are able-bodied and without children, would have to be working to be eligible for food stamps. Those without a job would be required to attend a minimum of 20 hours a week of new job-training classes, which would increase to 25 hours in 2026.

The program currently has work requirements for most people between the ages of 18 and 49, but governors in states with high unemployment are able to waive them. SNAP's current provisions include exemptions from work requirements for those who are elderly, disabled or have school-age children. The new bill would end the waiver allowances for high-unemployment states.

According to *Politico*, the draft of the farm bill also calls for severing ties between SNAP and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which helps low-income households pay their energy bill. Most states use a provision in SNAP that increases a household's food stamp benefits if they participate in

LIHEAP.

The new bill would also eliminate a provision known as "broad-based categorical eligibility" that allows states to simplify the enrollment process for food stamps when someone is already on another welfare program.

Democrats in the House Agriculture Committee say the new proposal could result in the loss of benefit eligibility for 1 million people. Democrats in the committee have stated their full disapproval of the new proposal. However, their opposition, to the extent that it exists, is centered on arguments that people would not show up to job-training programs and that the bill's implementation would create a larger bureaucracy.

The Trump administration is also proposing to cut funding for SNAP by \$129 billion, or roughly 20 percent, over a decade by shifting food stamp benefits to a state-run box delivery system, called America's Harvest Box. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, more than 16 million households would no longer receive full SNAP benefits on cards, but would get half in the form of cereal, beans, canned fruits and other food purchased by the government through wholesale channels instead of at supermarkets.

Approximately 43 million Americans currently receive food stamp benefits. To qualify for food stamps, a household must have a net income below 130 percent of the poverty line, or about \$26,000 a year for a family of three. On average, a family of three receives \$373 a month in assistance, but food stamps often don't cover a full month's worth of food.

Critics of work requirements state that they mostly increase food insecurity and argue that food, health insurance and housing are all keys to helping people get and stay employed. One Ohio survey found that many SNAP recipients have unidentified injuries, such as

chronic pain, that prevent them from working. Factors such as language barriers, education, and lack of transportation also prevent people from working.

Rep. Mike Conaway (Republican of Texas), chairman of the Agriculture Committee, has made clear that the work requirements are aimed at pushing people off SNAP. “We’re going to get you on that ladder to success that gets you off these programs and having you take care of your family the old-fashioned way,” Conaway said in a speech in Texas last month. “If you choose not to, if you say, ‘Well, you know, that food stamp thing is just not worth it, don’t want to work,’ great. We’re Americans. That’s your choice.”

A Feeding America report found that one out of every eight people, and one out of every six children, did not consistently have access to food in 2015. The new farm bill would only make it harder for poor people to purchase food and increase food insecurity in the United States.



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