

Trump administration overpays, underdelivers on USDA food box program for the hungry

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New reports on the Farmers to Families Food Box program indicate that the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) overpaid and underprovided on promises to deliver tens of millions of food aid boxes to families in need.

Ostensibly, the program was designed to bridge the gap between farmers who had lost markets during the pandemic and the millions of people struggling to put food on the table. It would do this by contracting distributors to purchase, package and deliver the food to charities and food banks around the country.

In theory, this would have provided food to those in need, saved farmers from bankruptcy and eased the burden on food banks. The reality has been far from what was promised. Within just weeks, the program has been riddled with issues of inefficiency, disorganization and fraud.

The USDA had promised to deliver 40 million boxes by the end of June. By June 17, only 17 million boxes had been delivered and by the end of July Reuters was reporting that just two-thirds of the boxes ordered had actually arrived.

Food banks across the country were reporting that orders were not being fulfilled. In Puerto Rico, the distributor Caribbean Produce Exchange failed to show up to a scheduled distribution event in mid-May in San Juan, leaving 600 people waiting for food that never arrived.

The catering company CR8AD8 (pronounced Create a Date) was awarded a \$39 million contract but failed to deliver 250,000 boxes of the 750,000 ordered. The boxes that were delivered were often reported to have issues with packaging and labeling, making it difficult for food banks to actually distribute the provided food

once delivered.

Even when food boxes were delivered on time they were consistently overpriced. Both Caribbean Produce Exchange and CR8AD8 were paid up to \$100 per box, much to the dismay of food bank organizers who noted that equivalent boxes could be made for two-to-three times less money.

The issue lies in the very structure of the program.

Other food aid programs provide assistance directly to food banks from farms. Last year, for example, the USDA purchased 18.5 million gallons of milk and delivered it to food banks free of cost. Also in 2019, the USDA purchased \$1 billion worth of food impacted by increased tariffs and delivered it to food banks as well.

Instead of distributing food directly, however, the USDA has overspent on contracts to outsource distribution. The idea was that food banks could not afford to distribute the extra food directly to people in need so the contractors would be paid to do that instead. This was referred to as “truck to trunk” and was expected to alleviate much of the pressure placed on food banks to handle nearly double the demand of previous years.

It is now becoming clear that distributors oftentimes did not even uphold this end of the bargain. Food bank organizers have been reporting that distributors have been delivering food to warehouses and then leaving the food banks to foot the bill to handle the “last mile” from the warehouse to the distribution site.

A particularly severe example of this was Gordon Food Service, which refused to deliver outside of its “footprint,” according to Sherrie Tussler, executive director of Wisconsin’s Hunger Task Force. This meant that indigenous communities were left out of

reach of the food box program and Hunger Task Force was left to pay \$50,000 to deliver the food itself, using money that could have been spent helping more people.

To make matters worse, contracted distributors have generally purchased food from the same commercial vendors that food banks would typically buy from themselves. This means that not only are the contractors essentially pointless as middlemen, but that the farmers whom the program was ostensibly created to protect have hardly benefited at all.

All the money that has been poured into paying distributors for nonexistent services has translated to overinflated box prices and wasted funds. According to the USDA, the weighted average price for fresh vegetables is 64 cents per pound and 71 cents for fresh fruit. This means that a typical American worker should be able to purchase a 20-pound box of fresh fruits and vegetables for less than \$14. Eric Cooper, CEO of the San Antonio Food Bank, told NPR that “some of these food boxes, they were \$40, \$50, \$60 for what you’d get at a grocery store for about \$20.”

Millions of dollars that could be utilized to feed struggling workers have been wasted all while millions of American families go hungry and millions of pounds of food have gone to waste in the fields.

The USDA has taken some steps to improve the program, including increasing the size of boxes to 30–40 pounds and mandating that they be combinations of produce, meat and dairy with set minimum requirements for each group. Previously, boxes weighed 15–20 pounds and were often just one type of food.

However, this is far too little too late. The extra \$1 billion will amount to just 31 cents for each food insecure person, which Feeding America believes has risen to 54 million people due to the pandemic.

The Farmers to Families Food Box program has been a wasteful and disorganized mess that has failed to accomplish even its most basic goals. It is little more than an electoral campaign stunt for President Trump, who has also ordered the placement of signed letters in food boxes touting the President’s response to the pandemic. Such a move is a blatant attempt to utilize federal funds to promote the Trump campaign and is another wasteful insult to the millions of people suffering from the pandemic.



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