

Tens of millions of Americans require aid as USDA food box program nears expiration

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The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farmers to Families Food Box Program is set to expire at the end of the month. The program was designed to provide food to charities and food banks by contracting companies to purchase food from farms and deliver it to local charitable organizations.

This is the fourth round of budget allocations for the program, running from November 1 to December 31. In total, the program has been allocated \$4.5 billion since it began in May of this year. The first three two-month rounds had budgets of over \$1 billion.

This current two-month round of funding, however, was drastically cut to just \$500 million.

With the amount of funding cut by more than half, food banks around the country are already reporting that contractors have already used up their funding, leading some contractors to cease their scheduled deliveries earlier than expected.

The USDA claims the drop in funding was the result of many charities choosing to receive more boxes earlier in the year with an understanding that it would deplete resources by the end of the year. However, charities interviewed by the *Washington Post* stated that they were not informed of the potential lack of resources for this round.

The food box program was part of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), which was enacted with up to \$19 billion in funding to support farmers who had suffered financial losses during the pandemic. The second iteration of this program, approved by the USDA after the end of the first round on September 11, allowed for up to \$14 billion in funding.

With \$14 billion allocated to the same program that funded the food box initiative, there is no reason that more money could not have been provided for food aid. This is especially true with a record number of people

turning to food banks this year.

The need for more food aid has risen considerably during the pandemic. In 2019, an estimated 34 million people suffered from food insecurity. That number is expected to rise to 54 million by the end of the year, according to Feeding America, the largest food bank network in the United States.

With such a drastic increase in the need for food aid, the stress upon food banks and charities to meet the demand has been immense. Miles-long car lineups have been seen at food banks across the country, with many reporting that it is their first time seeking assistance. Food banks across the country are reporting upwards of a 100 percent increase in demand, making the aid from programs like Farmers to Families so important.

Amid the crisis triggered by the pandemic, the food boxes that the USDA has provided have been critical for many communities, but the USDA has not done enough to address the needs of the working class.

Feeding America estimates that between June 2020 and June 2021 the nationwide demand for food aid will total 17 billion pounds of food, three times last year's distribution.

So far, the USDA has provided 126.1 million boxes of food. While the USDA has changed the size of the boxes over the course of the program, an average box was likely around 25 pounds of food. This means that the USDA has provided around 3.15 billion pounds, about half of what Feeding America alone expects to be able to distribute next year.

This is a significant amount of food, but it does not meet the need and the program has been plagued with chronic issues, from delivery to quality.

Since food boxes are packaged by contractors, they are all different in their composition and quality. Some recipients have reported high-quality produce from one

vendor but low-quality processed meats and moldy produce from another.

A lack of oversight and standard quality requirements has made the program a mess. Some contractors failed to provide the number of boxes promised, while others failed to deliver the boxes to the actual distribution location, ultimately costing the food bank extra money to store and move it.

No program of uniformity regarding what food items would be provided was enforced either. Recipients could only hope that the food they received was of good quality and quantity. In the early stages, many boxes were only filled with one item, forcing the USDA to require that all boxes be composed of produce, meat and dairy products.

But even still, the boxes remained a mystery to those who received them, and the inability of people to choose their items often led to waste as people discarded poor-quality items or allergens.

The USDA is allowing the program to expire as the pandemic breaks records every week. Tens of millions of people are in dire need of food. The food crisis has become so acute that instances of people shoplifting food items from stores have increased considerably. Millions of people cannot afford to pay for rent and utilities, lines for food banks are miles long and tens of millions of people still cannot afford decent health care during an international health crisis.

Considering how little the United States government has done, in both the Republican and Democratic parties, it is inconceivable that the Trump administration will provide more aid between now and the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden. Nor is it likely that a future Democratic-run government would compensate for Trump's failures, given Biden's refusal to commit to saving lives during the pandemic and the unwillingness of the Democratic Party to demand that adequate social resources be provided.



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