

Baby formula shortages reach more than 80 percent in some states amid US government inaction

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The catastrophic baby formula shortage in the United States continues to deepen as stores across the country run out of stock and shelves remain empty, while families seek alternatives to commercial products to feed their infants and toddlers.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration's Operation Fly Formula campaign, which used military aircraft to ship baby food in from overseas, has done nothing to address the severity of the crisis.

As the nationwide average out-of-stock rate has surged past 70 percent, some states are experiencing numbers that are far higher. According to Datasembly, a real-time retail product information analytics company, California, Missouri, Minnesota, Nevada, Montana, Louisiana, Arizona and Utah have shortage rates of over 80 percent. Utah has the highest out-of-stock rate of 89 percent.

A report by KSLTV on Tuesday said that Mountain West Mother's Milk Bank in South Salt Lake, which provides nearly 15,000 ounces of breast milk per month, has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of requests from medical facilities with Newborn Intensive Care Units (NICU).

Jennie Noren, operations director for the milk bank, told KSLTV, "Our usual hospital amounts and orders have doubled and almost tripled for some of the hospitals." She added that it takes the bank about 10 days from the time milk is donated to process and deliver it to hospitals. "Hospitals where they may have used a specialty formula, they are now using human donor milk because they don't have access to that formula."

Although the dramatic disruption in the supply of infant formula is a life-threatening matter, the last

communication from the Utah Department of Health was a series of tweets on May 26 that showed photos of mostly empty supermarket shelves. And it said, "We are becoming 'slightly' more optimistic about the availability of baby formula in Utah. ... It is still going to be some time before supplies are normal again, but we are hopeful we will get there. The lack of specialty formula remains one of our biggest problems."

On Monday, WXIX spoke to Kathy Furman of Loveland, Ohio, a town northeast of Cincinnati, whose daughter, 14-year-old Morgan, has Robert's Syndrome and requires a feeding tube and specialized formula. Kathy has been feeding her daughter EleCare Jr., which was recalled during the FDA-mandated shutdown of Abbott Labs' manufacturing facility in Sturgis, Michigan, last February.

She said, "We have to have that specialized formula so my kid can live. I mean, she has to have it in order to survive, and Morgan's is just as important as the next person."

Arizona resident Sandramaria Hicks needs a specific formula for her 10-month-old son, Wesley, who has milk allergies. She told the *Tucson Sentinel*, "We went everywhere, even 50 miles out, and we couldn't find anything."

Candice Tanner, a grandmother from Phoenix, explained to the *Sentinel*, "I worked 50 plus hours a week, and then any time I wasn't at work, I was literally driving hundreds of miles to find baby formula." Tanner has been helping find formula for her 9-month-old granddaughter Gabriela. "I would drive to Mesa all the way to Surprise [another city in Arizona] to find nothing at all."

The US baby formula shortage that is threatening the

lives of children and special needs individuals across the country is a manifestation of the callous indifference of the capitalist ruling elite to the most vulnerable sections of the population. The supply chain crisis that arose at the beginning of the pandemic intersected with a dramatic fall in the number of babies being breastfed by their mothers. To the consequent spike in demand was then added the FDA shutdown of the Abbott Labs baby formula factory in Michigan which had become infested with bacteria.

The US pediatric nutritionals market is dominated by four manufacturers—Abbott, Mead Johnson Nutrition, Nestle USA and Perrigo—that supply 90 percent of the formula sold in the US. Abbott Labs supplies 40 percent of the market with its Similac, Alimentum and EleCare products, all of which are manufactured at the Sturgis facility.

The Biden administration announced with great media fanfare its Operation Fly Formula last week. The first shipment of a pathetic 75,000 pounds of Nestle's Alfamino powdered product arrived in Indianapolis from Germany on May 22. Since then, little else has happened, other than a second flight from Ramstein Air Base with 100,000 pounds of Gerber baby food products which arrived in Washington D.C. on Wednesday.

On Friday, the White House and FDA announced that the Australian company Bubs was sending 27.5 million eight-ounce bottles of a “variety of infant formulas,” including goat’s milk, organic cow’s milk and other specialty formulas. The only immediate benefit that Biden’s tweeted announcement of Bubs product shipment to the US was that the stock value of the Australian company surged by 77 percent on the Sydney Stock Exchange.

As experts have pointed out, these deliveries will not even make a dent in the crisis. Some have denounced the measures as “political theater,” including Peter Pitts, a former associate commissioner at the Food and Drug Administration.

Pitts told *The Hill*, “I think if the president had said, you know, this is not the solution to the problem, but it’s something we can do right now for those infants most at risk, I think that would have been [better] than a grand announcement that’s going to have significant but limited impact for the majority of American parents.”

While the US baby formula shortage is a product of the capitalist system and both of its two political parties are responsible for it, Republicans have been quick to hide behind the crisis and place all of the blame on the Biden administration.

An example of this type of political play-acting was demonstrated by Republican Senator Josh Hawley, the January 6 coup supporter from Missouri, who said the crisis “has been one failure after another by Joe Biden’s administration” and “there needs to be an investigation into what the FDA was doing, what is happening at the FDA, why they were not on top of this problem and why did it take so long to get the production facility reopened.” Hawley appears to be unaware that the Abbott Labs Sturgis plant is still closed and may not reopen for several weeks.

In contrast to the inaction of the US government, one form that the public’s response to the crisis has taken has been a surge in donations to breast milk banks. Mother’s Milk Bank of Montana in Missoula reports that it has experienced a growth in stockpiles, and their freezers are now full. Taylor Pfaff, director of operations, told the *Missoulian*, “We were actually out of milk for most of January and February. And then we kind of did a big cry for help. And we had a lot of donors come in. So, we have a lot more donors than we’ve had in years, which is great.”



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