

# Background Paper

BREAD FOR THE WORLD

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## How the Farm Bill Can Help Reduce Hunger

by Michele Learner

*“One in 10 U.S. households... do not always have enough food to feed themselves or their families. In many cases, low-income Americans are forced to make choices that most Americans find difficult to even imagine.*

*As members of Congress, we don't have to rely on food stamps... but that means it is difficult for many of us to imagine what it is like to experience true hunger or to rely on the Food Stamp Program.”*

– Reps. James McGovern (D-MA) and Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO)  
Letter to Colleagues in the House of Representatives  
May 2007

Bread for the World's 2007 Offering of Letters, *Seeds of Change: Help Farmers. End Hunger.*, looks at the U.S. farm bill through the lens of hunger and poverty. Our efforts are focused on reforms that will help feed hungry people today and improve their opportunities to support their families in the future.

### A Fair Rural Policy

The farm bill is the United States' primary legislation on rural policy, so it is especially important to allocate farm bill resources fairly among all those affected by the law. These include a wide variety of farmers and other rural families, some prosperous and others of modest means. Currently only 6 percent of all rural residents own or work on farms, and only one-third of all farmers receive government payments for growing certain crops. So commodity payments cannot be considered a substitute for wider rural development efforts. In addition, some commodity payments distort international trade, which in turn makes it harder for low-income farmers in developing countries to sell their crops at a fair price.

For these reasons, Bread for the World urges our nation's decision-makers to identify viable alternatives to commodity payments based on production and type of crop. The solution could include, for example, improved crop insurance, 'green' payments for ecologically sound farming practices, and/or risk management accounts. Rural development assistance covers programs that help rural communities design their development strategies, provide local entrepreneurs with credit and technical assistance, and enable communities to build the communications infrastructure that will attract new employers. Allocating resources to initiatives that help a wider section of the rural population and do not distort trade are critical ways to reduce hunger through the farm bill. Hunger could be eased among both low-income U.S. rural families and farm families overseas.

### A Stronger Food Stamp Program: Affording a Healthy Diet

The farm bill's most direct impact on hunger comes through the Food Stamp Program and smaller federal nutrition programs.

Food stamps have an impressive record as the country's first



USDA  
Approximately half of all food stamp recipients are children.

line of defense against hunger. In the 1960s, malnutrition similar to that in developing countries could still be found in the United States. By the 1970s, researchers credited food stamps for the fact that acute malnutrition had virtually disappeared. After Hurricane Katrina and other major hurricanes hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, the Food Stamp Program did a widely praised job of enabling disaster victims to buy food for their families. Food stamp spending automatically increases to respond to needs, so the program was able to expand during the period of devastation that followed the hurricanes.

Because the United States still has a significant level of food insecurity and hunger, it is vital to maintain a strong Food Stamp Program. In an average month, the program serves more than 25 million people, nearly all living below the poverty line. Today approximately half of all food stamp recipients are children.

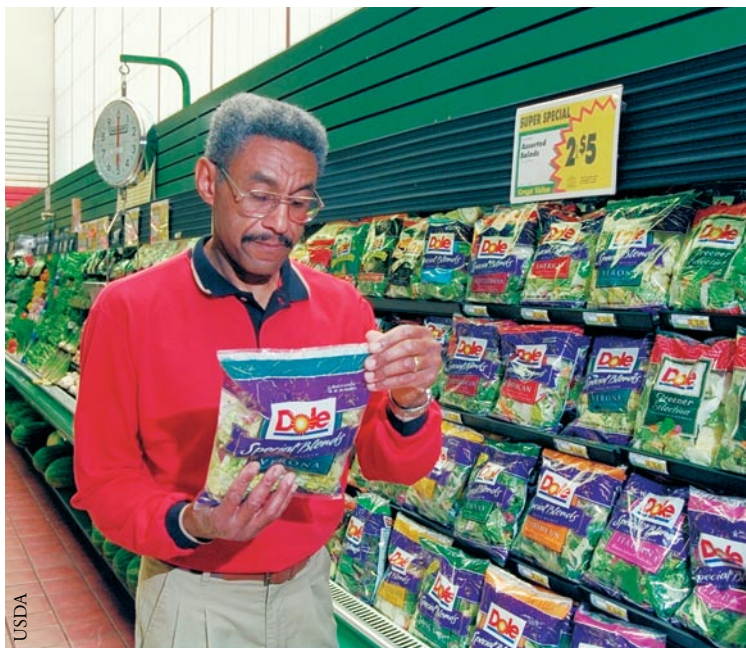
As the farm bill is reauthorized, Bread for the World urges Congress to raise food stamp benefits to enable participants to afford an adequate and nutritious diet. Although food stamps make a big difference in the lives of participants, providing meals that families otherwise could not afford, the dollar amount of the benefits is quite modest—the nationwide average monthly benefit amounts to roughly \$1 per meal per person.

The Food Stamp Program benefit size is not enough to provide an adequate diet, and participants struggle to make their benefits last through the month. The Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture published a study in 2006 which showed that nearly two-thirds of participating households used more than half of their benefits in the first week

of the month, and 56 percent of the households used more than 90 percent of their benefits in the first two weeks.

Moreover, researchers argue that the food stamp benefit is not enough to purchase healthy foods. The benefit is based on the cost of the “Thrifty Food Plan,” which was first developed for emergency use during the Great Depression. The Thrifty Food Plan is based on the assumption that families can spend one-third of their income on food, no longer true in an age of rising child-care, housing and transportation costs.

Researcher John Cook of the Boston University School of Medicine found that it would cost 30 percent more than the typical benefit to purchase a diet that meets the American Heart Association’s recommendations. Dr. Cook explained, “The government has dramatically underestimated the amount of food stamp benefits participants need, not to mention the extent of poverty in the United States, by using the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan... as the basis for determining maximum food stamp allotments and poverty thresholds.”



**With the current level of food stamp benefits, diets often lack essential nutrients, which are more expensive to obtain.**

The average \$1 per meal benefit is generally enough to purchase sufficient calories, but not enough to buy nutritious foods like fresh fruits and vegetables or lean meat, which are more expensive. It often results in a diet that lacks essential nutrients and is too high in fat and sodium. In April, the governor of Oregon and hundreds of Oregon churchgoers participated in a “food stamp challenge”—living on a food stamp budget for a week.

Governor Ted Kulongoski found his supermarket trip a challenge. Despite efforts to select the least expensive foods, his items totaled more than his allotted \$21 for the week. He returned two bananas and one Cup O’Noodles to stay within budget. Kulongoski received shopping help from Christina Sigman-Davenport, a mother of three who works for the Oregon Department of Human Services and began getting food stamps last fall after her husband lost his job. Her tips included: scan the highest and lowest shelves for lower-priced items, look for off-brand products, and rely on filling, low-cost staples like macaroni and cheese. In the longer term, she advised, he would need to clip coupons religiously and buy in bulk whenever possible.

Mary Sicilia, who participated in the “food stamp challenge” with other members of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, OR, found her choices limited. “How do you choose between bread and milk? Between lunch and dinner?” she asked. “With the Food Stamp Program, it would be hard to get ahead in terms of stocking up and easier to end up truly hungry at the end of the

month. I now understand why the Trinity Pantry is so besieged when food stamps run out.”

Participant Cheryl Richardson added, “We had to really plan out how we were going to spend that \$21 per person. We realized how much we snack—you can’t buy snacks on that budget. Children would not be able to have friends over and offer them a snack. If you were living where you had only one store at your disposal or you did not have transportation, this would make living on the meager amount a greater challenge.”

In May, Reps. McGovern and Emerson invited their colleagues in the House of Representatives to join them in living on a food stamp budget for seven days. Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH) and Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) agreed to participate. While shopping at Safeway, Ryan quickly saw the limits of his budget. “It’s unbelievable,” he said as he selected peanut butter, jelly, bread, and a big bag of cornmeal. He also got canned tomato sauce and pasta on sale. There was no money for meat, milk, juice, fresh fruit or vegetables, except 32 cents’ worth of garlic to flavor the tomato sauce. “By the end of the week, I’m going to be eating cornmeal and strawberry preserves.”

## Stronger Nutrition Programs: Participation and Eligibility

Along with raising the food stamp benefit, the farm bill could reduce hunger by increasing the participation of eligible people in the Food Stamp Program. Currently, only about 60 percent of those who are eligible are actually receiving benefits.

There are a variety of reasons that eligible people do not participate—lack of knowledge of the program and difficult application processes are just two of these. Participation also varies widely by state—from well under half to more than 80 percent. The Food Stamp Program can take advantage of “success stories” to find additional ways of reaching low-income families and simplifying the process of proving one’s eligibility. Already, for example, outreach materials are available in 37 languages—from Albanian to Yoruba—and some states offer Internet applications to cut down on trips to the food stamp office. Massachusetts recently enrolled 60,000 eligible seniors through a simplified application that one recipient called “a blessing in the mail.”

Bread for the World also supports expanding eligibility for the Food Stamp Program to some low-income people who do not qualify under current rules. For example, adults who are legal immigrants but arrived in the United States less than five years ago are not eligible to apply for food stamps even though many would qualify based on income from their jobs. Many people who have modest retirement savings also do not qualify and are forced to spend down their savings before they can receive food stamp benefits, even though they may need only temporary help.

## Going Forward

Bread for the World activists continue to contact decision-makers and educate their communities about hunger and the farm bill, their work grounded in the belief that Christians have a responsibility to help end hunger in God’s world.

And members of Congress have begun working to persuade their colleagues that farm bill reforms are important. When Reps. McGovern and Emerson began their “food stamp challenge,” they spoke of the value of direct experience. The goal, they said, is to “raise awareness of the difficulties facing food stamp recipients and demonstrate support for the Food Stamp Program’s vital role in providing nutrition assistance to low-income families.”

There’s a lot at stake in the farm bill. Thank you for calling for the improvements that will help hungry and poor people, both today and tomorrow.