



Addressing Diet Quality and Environmental Sustainability in the Farm Bill

Overview

The farm bill is a comprehensive multi-year bill that addresses nutrition and agricultural policy issues. It is typically renewed every five years and is scheduled to be reauthorized in 2023. Nutrition is about four-fifths of the full cost of the legislation and includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other critical nutrition and feeding programs.¹

As the United States continues to deal with the aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing concerns regarding the environmental impact of current dietary patterns, investments are needed in policies that will improve access to healthy food, the nutritional quality of food, diet quality, and ultimately the health of all.

SNAP and Food Insecurity

For more than 50 years, SNAP has been vital in addressing food insecurity in the U.S. In 2021, 41.5 million people participated in SNAP, up from 35.7 million people pre-pandemic, once again proving to be an essential safety net during the pandemic and economic downturn.² The majority of SNAP benefits go to households with children, older adults, or those with disabilities.³

SNAP plays a crucial role in addressing hunger and poverty. In March 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in sudden massive job loss and an increased number of Americans at risk for food and nutrition insecurity.⁴ To combat the effects of the pandemic, Congress authorized a temporary raise in SNAP benefits and dedicated additional funding to support the increased demand for SNAP.

The quick response of the federal government and states to increase the amount of and access to SNAP benefits is in part why food insecurity did not grow worse during the pandemic. However, research shows that SNAP benefits are often not adequate to last a family the entire month and three-fourths of benefits are exhausted by mid-month.^{5,6} A recent study found that 61% of SNAP households have exhausted their benefits by mid-month.⁷

Steps Forward to Improve Diet Quality in SNAP

Making changes to the SNAP program could lead to a spillover effect that improves diet quality for all Americans due to the role SNAP plays in determining what is marketed and sold in the retail environment. Programs authorized in the current or past farm bills have helped ensure that families can access healthy foods through SNAP.

Nutrition Incentives – authorized in the 2008 farm bill, the Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP) Program established pilot projects to evaluate health and nutrition promotion in SNAP to determine if incentives provided to SNAP participants and at point-of-sale increased the purchase of fruits and vegetables. In the 2014 farm bill, the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives (FINI) Program provided grants to eligible organizations to design and implement projects to increase produce purchases among families with low incomes who participated in SNAP by providing incentives at the point of purchase. The 2018 farm bill expanded FINI and renamed it the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), authorizing funds for nutrition incentive and produce prescription programs to income-eligible consumers participating in SNAP at the point of sale. An evaluation of the second year of GusNIP shows that the program has been successful in increasing produce consumption through nutrition incentives and produce prescriptions among participants.¹¹

Nutrition Education (SNAP-Ed) – originally authorized in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids act of 2010, SNAP-Ed addresses nutrition education, physical activity, and obesity prevention and aims to increase the likelihood that SNAP-

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Creating an enhanced pilot program within SNAP that assesses the outcome of fruit and vegetable incentive purchasing combined with the removal of sugary drinks to evaluate the effects on consumer purchasing, healthy food and beverage consumption, short-term health outcomes, and retailer implementation, coupled with a robust evaluation.

Include language that directs the USDA to invite applications from states to craft and evaluate pilot approaches to increase access to healthy foods and beverages and improve the diet quality for SNAP participants.

Increasing funding for SNAP-Ed and continued support of innovative nutrition education.

Improving the retail environment and increasing the availability and purchase of healthy foods.

Increasing funding for and expanding the SNAP online purchasing program.

GusNIP

Expanding baseline funding to further test the GusNIP program design and capitalize on current and future investments into organizational capacity.

Exploring options to decrease the burden of the match requirement including eliminating the match requirement altogether, reducing the match requirement for a maximum of 10 percent, or considering other federal sources of funding.

Requiring improvements to the application process and expanded technical assistance resources to improve program access and equity.

Developing a new mechanism for funding successful programs as they scale state or region-wide.

Sustainability

Leverage agricultural commodity subsidies to support the cultivation of diverse, nutritious food that promotes healthier and more sustainable production and consumption.

Increasing funding for existing programs that focus on sustainability and health.

Developing and supporting a food redistribution program to decrease food loss and waste.

Including policies and programs, such as incentives, that focus on conservation and expand and strengthen sustainable, biodiversity-friendly agriculture practices.

