

Recipe for disaster: Tighten eligibility for food aid, loosen eligibility for farm subsidies

This past summer, we had the opportunity to talk to members of Congress about the coming 2018 Farm Bill. One of the pieces of advice we gave was the importance of avoiding a “food fight” like the one we experienced in the runup to the 2014 Farm Bill. That time, members of one party tried to cut support for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—the old Food Stamps program) by separating nutrition programs from agricultural programs.

The idea was that by separating what was seen as an urban program, SNAP, from a rural program, agriculture, it would be easier to cut both or at least force the two programs to compete for the same scarce Federal budget dollars. Eventually the Senate brought the two program areas back together in the final legislation that was the 2014 Farm Bill.

This time we have some of the same actors determined to pick another food fight by imposing new work requirements on some SNAP recipients while loosening the rules on subsidy limitations for agricultural programs—a recipe for disaster unless the goal is to delegitimize most government programs.

First, even in a time of low prices, there is no need to loosen payment eligibility requirements for farm program payments. What is needed is not more eligible recipients whose ties to active farming are tenuous at best, but rather offering a program that supports legitimate farmers when prices are low and eliminating payments when prices are at or above the full cost of production; the proposals in the 2018 Farm Bill as offered by the House of Representatives do just the opposite.

Second, the logic behind the idea that one can incentivize people to find a job by threatening to cut off their meager SNAP benefits is weak, at best. Most households receiving SNAP benefits have at least one working adult. The problem is not the desire to work but the availability of jobs that provide steady employment at wages sufficient to support a family.

The strategy being used to incentivize people to work more hours a week, reminds us of a story we heard in grade school.

It seems that there were two children, each with a donkey and a cart, and they decided to have a little race to see whose donkey was the fastest. The one child went to a nearby tree and cut off a thin stick that could be used to hit the donkey to get it to move more quickly. The other child went to a nearby garden patch, pulled up a carrot, and tied it to a long stick so the carrot dangled just in front of the donkey’s nose. Which child’s donkey do you think won the race?

Evidence from states that have tried the stick approach suggests that it doesn’t work. All that happens is that the number of hungry increase, putting extra pressure on charitable resources. We could go into the problems with the present legislation, onerous monthly reporting requirements, unstable work opportunities for those already working part-time, punitive policies that would force people off the SNAP program for as many as 3 years at a time, underfunded and inadequate workforce development programs to provide people with the training they need, but this modest list is sufficient to understand the negative consequences of the current proposal.

Our thought is that if members of Congress really want to reduce the number of people receiving SNAP benefits, they would instead offer a carrot. They would increase the minimum wage to \$15.00 an hour nation-wide. That alone would increase the wages and income of a lot of people, reducing the number of persons qualifying for SNAP benefits. The result: lower SNAP enrollment.

We hope that the Senate will, like last time, insert a modicum of sanity into their farm bill proposal and stop a “food fight” that looks no better in the halls of Congress than it does in a high school cafeteria.

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