

2023 Farm Bill: Nutrition programs

In a little more than a year, many of us will find ourselves caught up in the debates over various proposals vying for inclusion in what will be generically called the 2023 Farm Bill. As a part of our preparation for discussing various legislative proposals as they come to the fore, we plan to use this column and those we write in the coming weeks to use a broad brush to lay out our understanding of the issues at stake in the broad elements (e.g., nutrition, farm financial support, conservation, market integrity, rural development) that make up contemporary farm/nutrition legislation.

This week we would like to examine some of the issues surrounding the nutrition programs that are responsible for the largest financial outlays in recent farm bills. Nutrition programs include:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, often referred to by its previous name: Food Stamps),
- Women, Infants, and Children (WIC),
- Child Nutrition (formerly known as the School Lunch Program but now with a broader mandate),
- The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP),
- Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and
- Commodity Supplemental Food Program, among others.

As each farm bill is written there are heated debates over the scope of these programs, but especially SNAP. Some want to limit the level of benefits as well as the qualifications for receiving program benefits under the belief that if the benefits are too generous or if too many people are included, it will encourage laziness on the part of recipients.

We have a different perspective.

We see having access to a nutritional, culturally appropriate diet as a human right.

Will some people take advantage of various nutrition programs? Certainly.

But, putting religious and humanitarian concerns aside, we believe that the benefit to society of eliminating hunger and undernutrition exceeds the costs of ensuring an adequate diet for all citizens.

Undernutrition results in stunted physical and mental development in children that have lifelong consequences. They are less able to contribute to the physical and social resources of society and they place a greater demand on social and health care resources as they grow older.

In adults, the inability to provide themselves with an adequate diet can result from trauma, mental illness, physical disability, and other factors. Many of these factors are beyond the control of the individual. Again, undernutrition results in additional costs society.

Ensuring that every person has access to a stable nutritious diet, enables more people to contribute to the welfare of our local and national community.

Fully funded farm bill nutrition programs are an effective, efficient way to ensure that everyone living in the country has access to an adequate diet, resulting in the lower long-term costs that result from undernutrition. A similar argument could be made at the international level.

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