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Food stamp funds may be reduced

Republicans gain some Democratic support in efforts to trim back on food stamp eligibility in the farm bill. Anti-poverty groups and some Democrats object.

By Lisa Mascaro, Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON — With 1 in 7 Americans now receiving food stamps, Republicans in Congress are leading efforts to cut back the social safety net program that has swelled to one of the largest in the federal government — and they are getting some support from Democrats.

The farm bill being debated in the Senate reduces funding for food stamps and is finding support from both sides of the aisle as lawmakers look for ways to cut the nation's rising debt in an election year.

Trimming back on eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, as food stamps are called, would save \$4 billion over the decade. Republicans are pushing to reduce that even more.

But the shift in attitudes at a time when the economy remains sluggish in many parts of the country has drawn protests from anti-poverty groups and some Democrats.

"Increased SNAP participation has helped millions of families avoid hunger during this deep recession," said Matthew Sharp, a senior advocate at California Food Policy Advocates. "We see any reduction of the size of benefits as a hit that families can't afford to take."

The voluminous farm bill is one of the few bipartisan efforts in this deeply divided Congress. If approved, it will set agriculture policy for the next five years.

As record deficits fuel anxiety, lawmakers have chiseled \$23 billion from agricultural programs — even below reductions mandated for the coming fiscal year by last summer's debt deal with the White House.

But the hit to the food stamps program, which has seen its costs skyrocket during the economic downturn, has sparked debate.

"Is the benefit going to the right people? Is the money being expended wisely?" questioned Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.), who has led efforts to change the program, during a recent Senate speech. "Is it encouraging people to look for ways to be productive and be responsible for their families? Or does it create dependency on a series of government programs?"

An estimated 45 million Americans received food stamps in 2011 — more than ever, at a cost of \$78 billion.

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That was a sizable increase from 2007, when 26 million Americans received food assistance at a cost of \$30 billion, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

The average household using food stamps has a monthly income of \$731 and receives \$287 in SNAP benefits, the budget office said. Three-fourths of the households include a child, a disabled person or someone older than 60.

The nation's stubbornly high employment rate and temporary increases in aid provided under President Obama's recovery act helped send costs rising to record levels.

The bipartisan bill making its way through the Senate would trim benefits by about \$90 a month for about 500,000 households, the budget office said, largely by eliminating automatic enrollment for some households receiving nominal aid under federal home-heating assistance programs.

The bill also would ban anyone who has substantial lottery or gambling winnings from receiving food stamps, and prevent stores that primarily sell liquor or tobacco from accepting SNAP benefits as payment.

Republicans want to further limit the eligibility requirements. Sessions proposed a pair of amendments that would have saved an additional \$11 billion over the next decade, but both were defeated Tuesday.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) was leading efforts to restore the food assistance program by paying for its costs with cuts elsewhere to agricultural subsidies.

The Senate bill, if approved later this week, is likely to face resistance in the GOP-led House, where Republicans have also sought cuts to SNAP.

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