



320,000 Calif. households could lose extra food stamp benefit due to farm bill

Raju Chebium, Gannett Washington Bureau 4:03 p.m. PST February 18, 2014



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WASHINGTON -- The nation's new agricultural law could trim monthly food stamp benefits for 320,000 California households.

Under the farm bill, which President Barack Obama signed into law this month, some food stamp recipients in California, 13 other states and the District of Columbia could lose the extra benefit they receive on top of the standard monthly amount from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

The additional benefit -- averaging \$62 a month per household in California -- is given to food stamp recipients whom the state enrolls in the so-called heat-and-eat program, aimed at helping Americans who need federal assistance to pay their grocery and utility bills.

Nearly 2 million California households are enrolled in SNAP, called CalFresh in the state. Their average monthly benefit is \$330. Among those households, 320,000 receive a bit extra through heat and eat, according to Oscar Ramirez, spokesman for the California Department of Social Services, which administers CalFresh.

CalFresh recipients are given a token \$1 a year in heating assistance -- the minimum required under federal law -- in order to enroll in heat and eat so they can get expanded food aid.

The heat-and-eat allocations come from the Low-Income Heating Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, and can be used to pay heating or cooling bills. California's LIHEAP grant was \$146.1 million in fiscal 2013, down from \$248 million in 2009, according to the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, an advocacy group.

Under the new agriculture law, states must increase the heat-and-eat allocation to at least \$20 a year for each qualifying household.

That change was written into the law to satisfy critics who wanted to prevent states from increasing food stamp enrollment without actually spending more of their LIHEAP grants.

California officials said Tuesday they haven't decided whether to increase the heat-and-eat allocations or end their participation in the program.

"We are assessing our options regarding the farm bill changes that impact the heat-and-eat program," said Rachel Arrezola, spokeswoman for the California Department of Community Services & Development, which administers LIHEAP statewide. "We are working with both our federal and state partners to assess the impact of these changes, including the benefit of a possible delay."

California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer are among 17 Capitol Hill Democrats pushing for the new heat-and-eat requirement to take effect later.

They signed a letter that Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., wrote to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack on Tuesday, urging him to delay implementation until the fall, when states get their next round of LIHEAP grants.

"Our states need time to adjust their policies to accommodate this drastic cut," according to the letter.

Alexis Fernandez, legislative director for the nonprofit California Food Policy Advocates, said state officials face a tough choice. Ending heat and eat will increase hunger in some families, but continuing it will reduce federal help for many Californians who're struggling to pay their utility bills.

"SNAP benefits are generally inadequate. So we know that households are unable to meet their monthly food expenses. They run out in the third week. (Heat and eat) was an option that allowed California to address benefit adequacy. And so we commend the state for taking that option," Fernandez said.

Congress should have increased funding for the food stamp program rather than cutting it in the farm bill, Fernandez said.

"We really wanted to see a farm bill that preserved and protected those benefits," she said. "The cuts, to us, were quite horrible."

Rep. Kurt Schrader, an Oregon Democrat who was one of 41 farm bill negotiators, said the heat-and-eat change was a crucial compromise that helped push the legislation through Congress.

States that have been giving a mere \$1 in heating aid have been "gaming the system ... to get a jillion people on (food stamps) and pretend they're actually giving heating assistance," Schrader said.

The farm bill's new heat-and-eat standards are expected to save \$8.6 billion, about half of the \$16.6 billion the bill is projected to save over 10 years. House Republicans had pushed for \$40 billion in cuts to SNAP over 10 years. The Senate had pushed for about a tenth of that.

Differences over the extent of the SNAP cuts were largely responsible for the two-year delay in Congress passing a new farm bill to replace the previous law.

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