

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 28, 2005

The Honorable Bob Goodlatte
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Collin C. Peterson
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Agriculture
1305 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Goodlatte and Ranking Member Peterson:

We are writing to urge you to protect the Food Stamp Program during the reconciliation process from harmful cuts or structural changes that would undermine the program's ability to assist low-income Americans across the country to avoid hunger and to purchase an adequate diet. We are deeply alarmed by three major threats to the Food Stamp Program this year: potentially deep cuts as part of the budget debate, threats to the national nutrition guarantee as part of the welfare reauthorization bill, and efforts to undermine immigrant eligibility. We want to make clear that we will oppose any such proposals.

The Food Stamp Program serves a critical need in both our urban and rural communities. It brings essential resources to families with children, seniors, and people with disabilities, which assist them in feeding their families; and thereby ameliorates one of the major burdens of low wages and poverty.

The Agriculture Committee must now come up with cuts of \$3 billion over five years under this year's budget resolution. President Bush proposed much higher cuts - \$9 billion over five years - from Agriculture Committee programs but limited the cut to food stamps to just 7 percent (or \$600 million). With the overall reconciliation target at only one-third of what the President proposed, the Committee should reduce the food stamp cut from the President's proposal correspondingly (7 percent of \$3 billion or \$200 million).

We are aware that some commodity groups recommend the Agriculture Committee make a majority of its cuts from nutrition assistance programs based on a false notion of "proportionality." The tables circulated suggest that such proportionality would be a "fair" way to make the necessary cuts. Nothing is further from the truth, and such notions must be rejected outright. To fund agricultural subsidies at the expense of hungry families is outright immoral and far from fair.

It would be offensive for the Committee to adopt a reconciliation bill that cuts the Food Stamp Program more deeply than what President Bush proposed. The Food Stamp Program provides average benefits of just \$1 per person per meal. There is no way to reduce food stamp spending without eliminating eligibility for vulnerable groups of people or lowering benefits in ways that increase the threat of hunger for millions of struggling families, seniors, and people with disabilities. Congress and President Bush have definitively decided in favor of immigrant eligibility in the food stamp program. Any efforts to reverse those accomplishments so hard fought in 2002 by Ret. Rep. Eva Clayton and Rep. Joe Baca will be opposed.

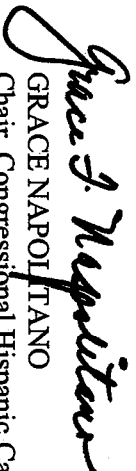
We understand that the House's TANF reauthorization is likely to be added into reconciliation this fall. Two provisions in the bill threaten the fundamental structure of the Food Stamp Program, which ensures that the program responds automatically to need and that poor people throughout the country are guaranteed nutrition assistance on the same basis. A block grant proposal would allow up to five states to elect a food stamp block grant instead of the regular federal Food Stamp Program. The "supervailer" proposal would grant sweeping authority to the Executive Branch to waive, at a governor's request, most provisions of the food stamp law, in addition to laws that govern a range of other low-income programs. Both proposals would undermine the national benefit structure by allowing states to overturn virtually all of the current program rules. We want to raise our strong objections to these provisions.

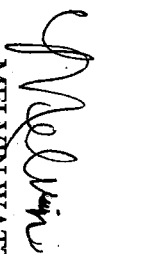
The Food Stamp Program is highly effective and well-run. In recent years the error rates for the Food Stamp Program have consistently improved and have now reached all-time lows. In 1996, the Food Stamp Program was cut by almost \$28 billion over five years. These cuts, particularly the severe restrictions on eligibility for legal immigrants and unemployed childless adults, hit very hard in our communities. Research has shown that hunger has increased since 1996 among legal immigrants and their families and people cut off food stamps by stringent time limits. Though we applaud the improvements and restorations that Congress and Administrations of both parties have secured since 1996, it is important to note that about two-thirds of the cuts to the Food Stamp Program from 1996 remain in effect.


What is at stake this year is more than just this year's budget debate. In 2007, Congress will need to reauthorize the Farm Bill, which includes virtually all of the programs in the jurisdiction of the House Agriculture Committee. We view the risk of cuts or eligibility restrictions and the potential structural changes resulting from the food stamp provisions in the TANF bill as part of the lead up to the next Farm Bill. Over the years, Farm Bills have required support in order to pass from urban and suburban Members whose constituents benefit more from nutrition assistance programs than from agricultural subsidies. We hope that in considerations over this year's cuts, the Committee will look forward to the 2007 Farm Bill and will aim to protect all the various interests that benefit from Agriculture Committee programs, including all of those vulnerable people who rely on the Food Stamp Program. The Committee's decisions on reconciliation this year will be an important factor for us as we consider the next Farm Bill.


We appreciate your careful consideration of these issues and look forward to working with you on these matters.


Sincerely,


GRACE NAPOSITANO
Chair, Congressional Hispanic Caucus


MELVIN WATT
Chair, Congressional Black Caucus


MICHAEL HONDA
Chair, Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus


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Member of Congress


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