



The Farm Bill is about more than farming

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You might not think something called the Farm Bill could have an impact on so many Coloradans who are neither ranchers nor farmers. But it does.

Congress passes the Farm Bill about every five years in an effort to stabilize and support U.S. agriculture, as well as nutrition programs for low-income families. The bill is currently being debated and will most likely be passed in the fall. The debate will center on farm subsidies versus wasteful spending and corporate versus family farms. You probably won't hear much about food stamps, even though they are a crucial part of the Farm Bill.

Some 25 million Americans rely on food stamps for their primary source of food and nutrition, more than 251,000 of whom are here in Colorado. That's about 5.3 percent of Colorado's population.

While the average food stamp benefit is only one dollar per person per meal, it is an essential resource for low-income families struggling to make ends meet. In Colorado, 80 percent of food stamp benefits go to families with children. The remaining benefits go mostly to senior citizens and people with disabilities.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that nearly 200,000 households in Colorado live with hunger or the constant threat of it. Behind the numbers are families, children, the working poor, and senior citizens living on a fixed income.

Right now, just over half of eligible Coloradans actually participate in the program. Many don't know about it or don't know that they're eligible; others are unable to get through the complicated application process.

Congress should change existing rules that deny food stamps to certain groups. Restrictive asset limitations for senior citizens, time limits for unemployed adults without children, and eligibility restrictions for legal residents should be eliminated altogether. Not only would easier access help thousands of people receive needed food and nutrition, but it would also have a substantial economic impact.

Since the food stamp benefits are spent directly at local grocers and markets, every \$5 in food stamp benefits brings in around \$9 in economic activity. So increasing participation by just five percent could generate an estimated \$25 million of economic impact for retailers like Atencio's Market, the Valley Food Co-op, Safeway, and City Market.

Fixing these problems will require more resources from Congress in what already promises to be a difficult budget year. Better investment in the Food Stamp Program will be challenging, but not impossible. Investing in well-nourished individuals builds their self-sufficiency now and creates a

more promising future for all of us.

An average of nearly 3,600 households in the San Luis Valley rely on food stamps in an average month: 1200 households in Alamosa County, 955 in Rio Grande, 615 in Conejos, and 430, 370, and 12 in Saguache, Costilla, and Mineral Counties, respectively. That equals about 20 percent of households in the Valley. We have no excuse not to act in their support. Likewise, Representative Salazar and Senators Salazar and Allard should be easily compelled to strengthen the Food Stamp Program. It is an essential benefit for farmers, retailers, and the people who need it the most: the 251,000 Coloradans who will go hungry today.

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