

Washington cuts food bank donations, as local agencies plead for relief

by Marcia Merry

Ever since in the 1930s Great Depression, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has donated various food commodities to local services around the country to relieve hunger and to improve nutrition. But now, at the end of the 1980s, despite unprecedented need, the USDA had begun extensive cuts in food donations. The USDA cupboard is bare, but USDA officials are quick to rationalize that the purpose of their department's commodity programs are not really to help the hungry, but rather, to prevent dangerous food "surpluses."

On Nov. 15-16, food aid hearings were held by the House Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations, and Nutrition. Dozens of officials from local food banks and other food service agencies testified on the dire consequences of the USDA's cuts in food supplies. All asked for more food to be provided through measures Congress should mandate as part of 1990 farm bill which is coming to a vote in Congress soon.

As of this fall, the USDA discontinued providing free cheese to the National School Lunch Program from the federal Commodity Credit Corp. (CCC) program. The USDA has also discontinued providing non-fat dry milk powder to schools, and many other projects, including the Women, Infants and Children's program (WIC), and to the elderly, those on Indian reservations, and others who receive supplemental food. This has been done, in the face of national—and worldwide—shortages of milk powder and of cheese.

USDA officials are scrambling to provide substitute commodities for these high-quality dairy items—for example, cans of evaporated milk, or some meat products and juice. But overall, the food commodities provided to localities is down by millions of pounds a year.

The chairman of the House subcommittee, Rep. Charles Hatcher (D-Ga.) said when he announced the hearings, "Typically our commodity donation programs were developed to help distribute, often to hungry Americans, our excess agricultural commodities. Over a period of time, the domestic food programs have come to rely on agricultural commodities, and yet the enormous federal holdings of commodities

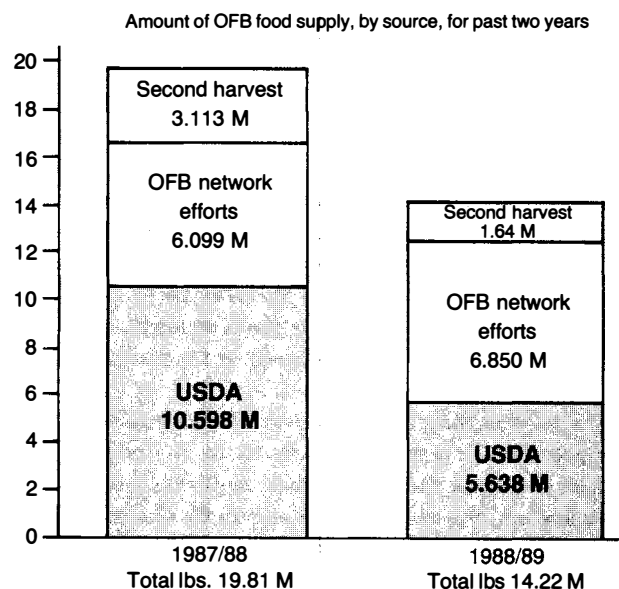
has been exhausted. Our challenge is to maintain these donation programs, while recognizing that the availability of high levels of commodities cannot be guaranteed."

Nutritional nightmare

Figure 1 shows the impact in one state, Oregon, of the reduction in USDA commodities on the supply of food for the statewide food bank system. In just one calendar year, the USDA reduced its provision of commodities by 4.9 million pounds. On Nov. 16, Winifred Nazarko, executive director

FIGURE 1
Food supplied by USDA to Oregon Food Bank declined by 5 million pounds from 1987/88 to 1988/89

Millions of pounds



Source: Oregon Food Bank

of the Oregon Food Bank, told the House committee that relief agencies now feed "17% of the state's total population at least once" in a year, which adds up to 480,000 individuals, about 44% of whom are children. The federal food program TEFAP (Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program) "is essential to hunger relief in Oregon," she said.

"In some communities, emergency food pantries have closed because volunteers have felt overwhelmed by demand they were unable to meet. Other programs have reduced the size of food boxes, hours of operation, or have introduced more stringent eligibility requirements for the receipt of emergency food."

Similar reports were provided to the House subcommittee by city and state food relief officials from all around the country.

New Orleans: In 1981, there were about 18,000 women, infants, and children who received relief from the USDA's Commodity Supplemental Food Program. Today, the USDA-assigned caseload is 27,992 people, but over 20,000 more are "waiting in line." Similarly, there are 27,000 elderly receiving food relief in the five parishes of greater New Orleans, but at least 25,000 more are in need, but the USDA caseload is "frozen," and no more food is being provided.

Gregory Ben Johnson, director of the Social Apostolate of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, asked for more federal aid for local food relief.

Washington, D.C.: The need for food assistance is soaring in the nation's impoverished capital. The case of one local soup kitchen, the Zacchaeus Community Kitchen at the First Congregational Church in Northwest Washington, is typical. Its director, Paul Magno, reported that the facility, which began 18 years ago, now serves 500 people each morning. This number has doubled in just two years.

Magno said, "How many we can actually feed in a day can fluctuate widely depending on the time of month, the weather, and the time of year. Though we are talking 500 now, we are concerned that we could be overwhelmed by the numbers we might face at the coldest part of the coming winter."

Magno described in detail the part played in a daily menu by federal commodities, even giving the congressmen his bulk recipes. "Our major source of food, of course, is the commodities which the Agriculture Department makes available to programs such as ours. Many of these items are an irreplaceable part of our effort to feed the many who come to Zacchaeus to eat. We use items such as rice, spaghetti, macaroni, peanut butter, honey, and oil steadily, week in and week out, to prepare our daily meal."

He continued, "One area that has hurt our program has been the decline in availability of dairy products. This has meant an end to the supply of butter, dried milk, and especially cheese. As we understand it, this is a result of changes in price support policies toward dairy farmers, and subsequently of the terms on which these items are available to the

TABLE 1
One 4-lb. package of nonfat dry milk and one 5-lb. package of cheese as a percentage of total nutrients in a standard senior food supplement

Nutrient	Total supplement	NF Dry milk & cheese Amount	%
Food energy (KCal)	30,888	15,000	49
Protein (grams)	1,792	1,139	64
Vitamin A (IU)	87,802	70,440	80
Vitamin D (IU)	8,972	8,001	89
Thiamin (mg)	16	8.1	50
Riboflavin (mg)	53.6	40	74
Folacin (mcg)	1,773	1,088	61
Vitamin B-6 (mg)	12	7.86	66
Vitamin B-12 (mcg)	118	88	75
Calcium (mg)	42,722	36,304	85
Phosphorus (mg)	45,816	34,777	76
Magnesium (mg)	3,318	2,622	79
Zinc (mg)	179	148	83

Source: Focus: HOPE, Detroit, Michigan.

state agency which then provides them to us. Whereas a year or two ago, these were designated as surplus items by the USDA and distributed on that basis. Accordingly, the District of Columbia has opted to purchase less expensive food items, and forego these. Unfortunately, for our diners, the cheese we used for sandwiches and the milk we used in baked goods or creamed soups was the only steady source of calcium we could provide, and there are no substitutes we can afford to provide on our shoestring budget. This will inevitably compound the health situation of poor people who already have difficulty keeping their teeth in good shape, for example, or of our elderly friends whose bones are brittle enough, or especially the women we serve, for whom such calcium deficiencies will mean greater difficulties with osteoporosis. We wish, most fervently, that the cheese we saw up until earlier this year were still available."

Detroit: Speaking for Focus: HOPE, a Detroit area food assistance agency, associate director Eleanor M. Josaitis stressed the detrimental effects the USDA cuts of dairy products are having on senior citizens who rely on food supplement packages. Josaitis submitted a table to the committee (Table 1) showing the high percentages of calories, protein, and key nutrients that have heretofore come from dried milk powder and cheese—both now canceled.

Josaitis said, "In recent months, the Department of Agriculture has announced that it is unable to supply non-fat dry milk to the program, and may reduce or eliminate cheese as well. For mothers and children, the department is substituting evaporated milk; for seniors, it has all but eliminated milk in favor of a little extra meat and juice.

"Neither of these options is acceptable. From a nutritional

standpoint, instant milk and cheese are both essential. Instant milk provides more than one-third of the protein in the food supplement, one-half of the calcium, 90% of the vitamin D, and upwards of 60% of several important minerals. Cheese is nearly as important. If the senior food supplement lacked both non-fat dry milk and cheese, seniors would lose 64% of the protein, 80% of vitamin A, 89% of vitamin D, and 85% of the calcium contained in their total food supplement."

National School Lunch Program: B. W. Ray, an official of the food services section of the North Carolina Agriculture Department, and representative of the national Association of State Agencies for Food Distribution, reported to the House subcommittee on the plight of schoolchildren. "The reduction of commodities, this year, primarily dairy commodities (cheese and nonfat dry milk), has had a negative impact on the budgets of the recipient agencies. Schools in particular, depending on individual menu choices, were using the equivalent of 5-15¢ worth of dairy commodities for each meal they served. The sharp reduction of dairy commodities has had great impact on the schools. Not only are they not receiving any cheese or nonfat dry milk from USDA this year, but the cost of buying these products on the open market is prohibitive. . . .

"But the dairy shortages is not the only pinch the schools are feeling. The results of drought, as we understand it, are the cause of the regular entitlement commodity shipments being delayed for a month or more. Consequently, states are reporting they have received literally half the volume of food they would normally have received by this time of year."

USDA pats self on back

The USDA testimony to the House subcommittee was to ignore the impact of the food cutbacks. Instead, USDA officials patted their agency on the back for its role in providing emergency food relief in the Hurricane Hugo and California earthquake disasters. Other than that, the USDA maintains that it has no role in donations of food to the needy if there are no federal "surpluses" to dispose of.

Robert H. Sindt, of the USDA Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) praised the more "market-oriented approach" to farm policy under the last (1985) farm bill, which has reduced the stockpile of federal surplus commodities, and has caused what he called "major drawdowns" of Commodity Credit Corp. federal stocks.

Sindt said that the buildup of federal dairy products for donation in the 1970s was a result of "too generous" USDA policies to dairy farmers. "In today's budget environment, it is clear that the operation of our agriculture price support programs [for the farmer] will not necessarily coincide with the need of domestic donation programs for increased volume of government-owned commodities."

In other words, USDA officials are telling the hungry that there may not be food, and are telling the farmer that he may not be farming in the near future.

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