

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Big jump in demand for food stamps

Instead of working to produce more food, the Bush administration is hunting for "welfare fraud."

An August report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows that the demand for food stamps has jumped up sharply since last year, directly in line with the worsening economic depression. Though this was predictable, the Bush administration grossly undercalculated the numbers involved. In addition, the USDA has nixed programs to increase food output, and instead pursued programs to seek out food stamp "fraud."

The USDA's fraud hunt is a parody of the many Department of Justice entrapment operations, involving months-long sting scenarios to entrap someone misusing food stamps. This would be merely amusing, were it not for the fact that millions of people are going ill-fed, suffering indignity and hunger.

From May 1989 to May 1990, at least 44 states have reported increases in people asking for food stamp help. Some states have up to 50% more requests. At present about 20 million people are on the food stamp rolls—the highest number since 1985. The administration projected there would be 18.1 million.

Much of the increase comes as a direct result of the administration-mandated cuts in the defense industry. New Hampshire is an example: There was a 54% rise in food stamp use in the state from June 1989 to June 1990, and a 38% increase in the state's welfare rolls.

The New Hampshire supervisor of the programs attributed this impoverishment to a slowdown in the state's economy, including a decline in the defense industry. "In many cases, people have gone from working full

time to working part time and have experienced a big decrease in income," the spokesman said.

The Agriculture Department report shows this, in terms of the connection of the increased use of food stamps with the growth of the main federal-state welfare program, Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFCD).

The states with the largest increase in food stamp use over the past year include: New Hampshire, 54%; Nevada, 26%; Florida, 19%; and Texas, 16%.

There are similar increases in welfare rolls: Kentucky, 17%; Connecticut, 16%; and Texas and Nevada, 15%.

Congress has had to scramble to even keep up with authorizations to pay for the additional food stamp use. President Bush originally asked for \$13.3 billion for an expected 18.1 million people. Congress voted \$14.8 billion, but then found that amount was insufficient, and in May, provided \$1.2 billion more.

For the next fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1, the House of Representatives has voted \$18.1 billion for food stamps. The Senate has yet to approve an amount. As more layoffs and job terminations are announced daily, the \$18.1 billion seems inevitably too small.

The occasion for the newly released report on the increase in need for food aid, is that Congress became alarmed at the escalating cost of food stamps, and commissioned the USDA to produce an explanation. While the report carried the official line that unemployment has been relatively stable, the USDA had to admit that "many states are showing signs of

economic slowdown that are not reflected in national economic indicators."

There have been many similar reports to Congress over the past year about the increasing need for food. In August 1989, the USDA announced that it no longer would supply dried milk powder and cheese for the national school lunch program, since government stocks for this purpose were depleted. Local school authorities have had to scramble, and to raise lunch prices, in an attempt to make do.

Earlier this fiscal year, resources ran out for the food aid for those in the Women, Infants and Children Program, which has had significant impact in reducing morbidity in the young, by providing supplemental foods (juice, peanut butter, dairy products). After the administration and Congress were burned in the media by state officials, money for the program was advanced—but from next year's fiscal budget.

The USDA, meanwhile, instead of dealing with the obvious task of assisting farmers to mobilize to grow more food, instead is conducting raids to prevent food stamp fraud. Each month the USDA issues press releases on recent arrests.

A top feature of Bush's original 1990 farm bill proposal was a plan to set up an anti-fraud team to swoop down on misuse of food stamps. A new pilot program has been authorized in the final farm bill, which calls for a person in need of food aid to have his or her name listed in a Big Brother computer program. Then, instead of receiving food stamp coupons, the person will have to obtain food at a designated supermarket, and file through a designated check-out line, where a clerk will check off approved food aid items against the person's account in the computer.