

Agriculture by Suzanne Rose

USDA to curb food stamp use

Millions of jobless run out of unemployment relief, and the Agriculture Department seeks to deny them food aid.

On Oct. 9, the U.S. House of Representatives passed an agriculture spending bill which would fund the food stamp program at \$23.4 billion, up \$2.8 billion over last year. However, the Labor Department estimates that 3.4 million laid-off workers will exhaust their unemployment benefits during 1992 alone.

At an average benefit level of \$65 per person per month for the food stamp program, the proposed level of spending will easily be used up. Although the program is mandated to accommodate all eligible individuals and households with insufficient income for food, indications are that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) intends to limit participation by establishing eligibility requirements that will restrict or thwart participation, as the need soars.

The past two years, since the Bush "recovery" began, have witnessed a huge increase in the numbers of people applying for food stamps, primarily among unemployed workers, and, more recently, among the many workers whose unemployment benefits have run out. During the month of July, enrollment reached a record 23.3 million people. Previously, those receiving food stamps were primarily people on welfare.

On Nov. 1, Rep. Tony Hall (D-Ohio), who chairs the House Select Committee on Hunger, sent a letter to the Agriculture Department protesting changes in eligibility requirements for food stamp recipients, which USDA is expected to release; on Oct. 1, congressmen got preview copies of the expected rule changes.

The effect on the nation's growing numbers of unemployed, hungry, and homeless will be devastating. Hall's letter touches on some of the most serious changes; however, they are much more extensive than reported in his letter, according to consumer advocate organizations. The changes include increasing the bureaucratic paperwork associated with the program, thereby making it more difficult for people to qualify; moreover, the paperwork would penalize recipients who are unable to comply with stricter reporting standards, or who become overwhelmed by them, or fail for some other reason to conform, by reducing their rations.

Obstacles are increased for homeless people who apply: They must document shelter expenses in excess of \$93 a month—not easy for a person living on a park bench. Other arbitrary roadblocks would keep newly unemployed people off the rolls by forcing them to sell such necessary items as cars, to buy food. Other conditions are imposed which Hall characterizes as causing unnecessary hardship to countless recipients.

And USDA is making it more difficult to enter the program when the need was never more urgent. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of persons applying for food stamps over the past year—indeed, since last summer. In August 1989, there were 18.7 million applicants; in August 1990, 20.49 million, an increase of 8%; and in August 1991, some 23.57 million, an increase of over 15%. There was a marked upturn over the summer months. In May,

there were 23.11 million people applying; in June, 23.28 million; in July, 23.27 million; and in August, 23.57 million, which coincided with the termination of unemployment benefits for thousands of workers. In July and August of this year, 300,000 workers exhausted their state unemployment benefits without being able to receive any extended benefits.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, levels this high are unprecedented in the recorded history of the unemployment insurance program. They say that the unprecedented lack of unemployment protection is likely to continue in the months ahead. Extended unemployment benefits have been cut off from all the states qualifying.

The USDA estimated in 1987 that, on an annual basis, one in seven Americans uses food stamps. The number of people seeking benefits has more than doubled in the last decade. Still, researchers from the Food Resource Action Center found, in a report issued earlier this year, that 37% of the families they interviewed in a random sampling of 2,335 low-income families, were eligible to receive food stamps, but were not receiving them. They either did not know they were eligible, or were too embarrassed to apply. The average benefit amounts to around \$.70 a meal. The average family runs out of food stamps by the third week in the month.

The Labor Department forecasts that 3.4 million unemployed workers, nearly 300,000 per month, will exhaust their state unemployment benefits in fiscal 1992. This is an increase over the estimated level of 3.1 million workers in fiscal 1991. The Labor Department estimates that only a tiny fraction of the 3.4 million workers exhausting their state unemployment benefits in fiscal 1992 will be eligible for the extended benefits program.