

Farm Bill Healthier US Nutrition Forum
Farm Bill Reauthorization Testimony
October 6, 2005

Under Secretary Bost, members of this committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding the 2007 Farm Bill Reauthorization and the role of federal nutrition programs.

My name is Angela Martin. I'm here representing Oregon Food Bank.

Oregon Food Bank is the hub of a statewide network of 800 hunger-relief agencies serving Oregon and Clark County, Wash. Oregon Food Bank recovers food from farms, government sources, manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers and individuals.

It distributes that food to 17 regional food banks across Oregon. In addition, Oregon Food Bank directly operates two regional centers serving the Portland metro area and one center in Southeastern Oregon. Those three centers distribute food to 300 food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters and other programs helping low-income individuals.

Oregon Food Bank also works to eliminate the root causes of hunger through advocacy and education. A core focus of our work is increasing participation in federal nutrition programs, including the federal Food Stamp Program. The Food Stamp Program is the nation's primary safety net against hunger. Food stamps reach more than 420,000 Oregonians. One of the many benefits of the Food Stamp Program is the fact that it serves individuals with low-income regardless of their age, health, parental or employment status.

The success of this program cannot be understated. Many voices in Oregon credit the Food Stamp Program as an important factor behind our recent improvement in the percentage of people who experience hunger. Beginning with the first USDA state-level food insecurity and hunger study, Oregon has consistently ranked among the top 10 states in the nation for hunger. The most recent USDA state-level study recorded some improvement in this number. Over this period, Oregon has become a national leader in working to reach more eligible families. From January 2000 to 2004, participation increased more than 70 percent.

Thanks to policy improvements adopted in the 2002 Farm Bill Reauthorization and implemented by our state Department of Human Services, among the thousand of new families now participating are a growing number of working families.

These are families who despite working do not make enough to guarantee they will have the income to acquire enough food to meet their basic needs. Policies aimed at simplifying and streamlining the application process as well as changes in asset and income standards have helped more people gain access to the food they need. This is particularly significant for Oregon.

Research conducted by Oregon State University reveals that hunger rates in Oregon are significantly higher in three categories that aren't usually at risk: double income households, households without unemployed people and households with two parents and children. For many of these families, food stamps are the primary assistance available to help them fill the gap between income and expenses, allowing them a greater measure of food security.

However, there are still too many in our state, in our nation, who remain hungry or food insecure. The demand for emergency food continues to grow as the cost of housing, childcare, health care and transportation increases faster than average incomes. The reauthorization of the Farm Bill presents us with the opportunity to celebrate and protect the gains we have made while working for improvements aimed at reaching those who continue to struggle to put food on their table.

We can reach these families through policy improvements aimed at strengthening access, adequacy and administration and expanding eligibility. Specific recommendations include:

- Raising the gross income eligibility threshold to 185% FPL. Doing so would align income guidelines with other federal nutrition programs and help expand access to more working families.
- Restore immigrant eligibility. Allow income eligible, legal adult immigrants to fully participate. Residency restrictions and concerns about sponsor deeming have created considerable confusion with the result being that many eligible, needy families are not accessing assistance.
- Raise the \$10 minimum benefit to \$25, and allow households with more than two members to qualify for the full minimum benefit.
- Revise maximum monthly benefit to reflect cost of purchasing food under the new Dietary Guidelines.
- Raise the dependent care deductions to \$400 a month per child to more accurately reflect the cost of child care.
- Adopt policies aimed at increasing food stamp usage at Farmers Markets and roadside stands. This includes providing funding for EBT technology at Farmers Markets and allowing Farmers Market associations to apply for food stamp authorization on behalf of member markets.

These are just a few of the issues and policy recommendations that would help us realize a future where nobody is hungry. Thank you again for the opportunity to share our experience and concerns with you.