

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.) and Sen. Jeff Sessions (R., Ala.) Discuss Farm Bill, SNAP
(food stamp) Issues on the Senate Floor

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SEN. LEAHY:

Madam President, no matter what calendar one goes by, we are nearing the end of this Congress. We have only a few short weeks to end the stalemate and pass a farm bill. For months, House leaders have blocked a vote on a bipartisan farm bill. We passed in this body, across the political spectrum—Republicans and Democrats alike—a bill that saved tens of billions of dollars. However, the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives will not allow it to come to a vote. Much is at stake—from rural communities to farmers who need the certainty that a farm bill extension would mean. I have said a lot of times on this floor that farming cannot be put on hold. We can't tell a farmer: Well, hold those crops for a couple of months while we wait to see what we are doing. Don't milk those cows for a few months until we figure out whether the Congress will get its act together on a farm bill. It doesn't work that way. Farmers already cope with innumerable variables in running their businesses. The last thing they need is for Congress to needlessly compound the uncertainty through weeks of delay and obstruction.

The Senate has passed a bipartisan bill under the leadership of the chair of our committee, Senator STABENOW. We passed a bipartisan bill that renews the charter for basic agriculture, nutrition, and conservation programs, while saving taxpayers \$23 billion. What I have been told privately is that if the House leaders would permit a vote, this bill would pass in the House. Just as Republicans and Democrats came together in this body, they would in the other body. Passing it would end this corrosive stalemate, while contributing billions of dollars to deficit reduction. Unfortunately, it appears the nutrition programs that help millions of our most vulnerable fellow Americans are the latest excuse for preventing a House vote to get the farm bill done. In this, the wealthiest, most powerful Nation on Earth, some are saying they will hold this up because we have hungry people who need the support our nutrition programs provide.

With so many Americans still struggling to put food on the table, it is not only regrettable, but more than that, it is inexcusable that some House Republicans have turned to slashing central nutrition help for struggling Americans as a means to prevent action on the farm bill. Ensuring that these programs can continue to serve

Vermonters and all Americans, especially those in need, is a key part of en-acting a strong farm bill for this economy. It is a reality recognized by the Senate-passed farm bill. Unfortunately, consideration of the farm bill is not the first time this Congress has been forced to debate legislation that will greatly reduce the ability of the neediest among us to put food on the table for their families. Bills and amendments have been proposed that would cut tens of billions of dollars from the food stamp program, eliminating nutrition assistance for millions of Americans and denying hundreds of thousands of American children school meals. I am proud that time and again during this Congress the Senate has defeated such proposals. I will continue to help fight back against such attacks.

The bipartisan Senate-passed farm bill makes an investment in American agriculture that benefits our producers, our dairy farmers, our rural communities, our Main Street businesses, our taxpayers, and our consumers. Now it is being held hostage by House Republicans who are demanding Draconian cuts in food assistance programs just as we are coming out of the worst recession in generations. They are preventing final action on a bill that touches every community and millions of our fellow citizens across the Nation. It is ironic that during this holiday season, opponents of nutrition programs that help the poor are insisting on making it drastically more difficult, or impossible, for these families and their children to simply eat.

No Member of the Senate, no Member of the House of Representatives goes hungry except by choice. None of us do. We don't know what that is like. We don't go home and look at our children and say: We can't feed you tonight; hold on for another day. I know you are hungry. I know you are crying. I know you can't sleep. But we can't feed you today. None of us face that. But I can tell my colleagues that there are people in every single State we represent where that is their reality.

Those advocating for these drastic cuts couldn't have chosen a worse time. As winter approaches, Vermonters and others across the country are going to find the demands for paying for heat, electricity, and food a large strain on their family's budget. All this is before we even take into account those areas where they are recovering from such terrible natural disasters and those communities who probably face disasters in the future. I know there are Vermonters, as there are so many other Americans, who struggle every day to make ends meet and are forced to make tough decisions about whether to pay for rent or heat or medications or food. We are talking about essentials.

The Presiding Officer and I represent two of the most beautiful States in this country, but we also know that both our States can get very cold in the wintertime. When it is 5 and 10 below zero, heat is not a luxury and food shouldn't be a luxury. When it is 5 below zero, the choice should not be, can we heat or can we eat? This in America? That is wrong.

While the economy continues to re-cover, and we hope it will, we still have many Americans who rely on basic assistance to get by each month. Thankfully, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, has helped fill the gap. It offers the most comprehensive assistance available to the poorest Americans.

No one can deny the effects of hunger on Americans, especially children. Children who live in food insecure homes are at a greater risk of developmental delays, poor academic performance, nutrient deficiencies, obesity, and depression. Yet participation in food assistance programs turns these statistics on their head. Federal nutrition programs have been shown to lessen the risk that a child will develop health problems, and they are associated with decreases in the incidence of child abuse. Children from families who receive SNAP have higher achievement in math and reading. They have improved behavior, social interactions, and diet quality than children who go without this nutrition help.

It is unfortunate that during this fall's campaign, we saw candidates who were intent on spreading misconceptions about a program that lifts millions of Americans above the poverty line each year. The contention that SNAP beneficiaries are largely out-of-work Americans is far from accurate. Two-thirds of the beneficiaries are children, the disabled, or the elderly who cannot be expected to work. The remaining participants are subjected to rigorous work requirements in order to receive continuing benefits. And while SNAP offers crucial support to a family's grocery expenses, the benefits far from cover all of a family's food needs. With a benefit average of \$1.25 per person, per meal, it is understandable that families typically fall short on benefits by the middle of the month.

Vermont has done a remarkable job at urging Vermonters to register for our SNAP program. We call it 3Squares. But the unfortunate reality is that thousands of Vermonters continue to go without food they could receive. I hear from Vermont families who participate in 3Squares about the importance of Federal food assistance. Parents have told me they ignore their own hunger to ensure their kids are fed, but they don't know how they can cope if benefits are cut further. Kathy, a mother from Barre, VT, where my father was born, says her child has come to her crying, wondering whether they will have enough money for food. Others have noted that expenses for necessities, such as heating and rent, are fixed costs. When Three Squares benefits run out, skipping breakfast or lunch is the only way to scrape by.

Unfortunately, both the Senate bill and the committee-passed farm bill in the House include cuts to the nutrition assistance. Nonetheless, the Senate bill takes a more sensible approach. Of the \$23 billion in deficit reduction included in our bill, \$4.5 billion comes from nutrition programs, nearly four times less than the House Agriculture Committee bill. I do not support the cuts in the Senate bill, and I supported an amendment during the Floor debate to restore this funding to SNAP, so that families across the country would not lose an average of \$90 per month in benefits. But the cuts in the Senate bill represent a concession from our Chair, and ultimately the Senate farm bill passed the Senate on a bipartisan vote, including mine, as it always has.

This concession is not enough for many House Republicans. The \$16 billion reduction in nutrition programs they wish to see in a farm bill would devastate nutrition programs nation-wide. Millions in every State in this country would be left without means to purchase food. These drastic reductions would result in the elimination of food assistance

for an estimated 2 to 3 million people, and 280,000 children would lose eligibility for free school meals. This is shameful.

The budget choices we make in Congress reflect who we are as Americans. The American people want budget decisions that are fair and sensible. Americans do not want their friends, neighbors, or family members struggling to feed themselves or their children. Proposed cuts to food assistance programs will mean more hungry families in America. I have spent nearly 38 years in the Senate fighting hunger and I will continue to oppose efforts in the farm bill to further roll back hunger assistance programs that help our neediest fellow Americans. In a nation that spends billions on wasted diet fads, I would like to see us spend some money to feed the hungry in the most powerful Nation on Earth.

SEN. SESSIONS:

Mr. President, that was very good debate. I would share the concern of Senator JOHANNIS. I remember we backed off this dangerous trend of changing the rules when we fixed the filibuster politically in this political institution. We need to figure out a way to solve this problem. I would say, without any doubt in my own mind, the real reason we have had to filibuster is because the majority leader, to a degree unprecedented in history, is controlling and blocking the ability of the minority party to even have amendments on bills. That goes against the great heritage of the Senate and cannot be accepted. That is why we are having this problem.

I wanted to share a few thoughts this morning about the food stamp program and some of the developments that have been going on. America is a generous and compassionate Nation. We do not want and will not have people hungry in our country. We want to be able to be supportive to people in need.

But every program must meet basic standards of efficiency and productivity and wisdom and management. This program is resisting that. It is the fastest growing major program in the government. In the year 2000 we spent \$20 billion on food stamps nationwide. Last year it was \$80 billion. It has gone up fourfold in 10 years. That is a dramatic increase. It is increasing every year and virtually every month. The most recent report in September had one of the largest increases in the program's history—another 600,000 added to the rolls, totaling now 47.7 million. One out of every six Americans is receiving food stamps. Oddly, when we attempted to confront our debt and our spending, we had huge reductions for the Defense Department. Some other departments took big cuts. The food stamp program was set aside. President Obama and the Democratic leaders said: We will not even talk about it. No less money, no savings, no review of food stamps. It cannot be changed. It should be left alone.

Well, that is not a good plan. As the ranking member on the Budget Committee, I have begun to look at the program to see how it is we have had such great increases. The agriculture establishment says every single dollar that is spent is needed for hungry people. I offered an amendment that would have reduced spending over 10 years from \$800 billion total to \$789 billion, reducing spending by \$11 billion based on closing a loophole, a categorical eligibility gimmick that should not be there, allowing people to receive benefits who did not qualify for them.

It was said: Oh, you want people to be hungry. It was voted down. I thought it was a very modest, reasonable change. By the way, agriculture spending in our government is different than a lot of people—Mr. President, what is the status of our time?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The time for morning business has expired.

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I have another 6 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. SESSIONS. That is where we are, I think, in terms of spending on the program and the need to examine it and see how it works. The establishment says every dollar is needed, not a dime can be reduced. I certainly agree that no one should be hungry in America. But we must know that the SNAP program, the food stamp program as it is commonly known, is not the only benefit that people have.

Indeed, an average family without income in America today would receive as much as \$25,000 in total benefits per year from the government if they did not have an income. They get things such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, they get SSI, housing allowance, free health care through Medicaid. They get food stamps and other benefits totaling at least \$25,000.

By the way, if you took all of the means-tested welfare-type programs that are in existence in America today, there are over 80. If you divide it up by the number of households who fall below the poverty line in America, it would be \$60,000 per household—\$30 per hour, on average, for a 40-hour work week. That is how much it would amount to.

The median income in America is less than that. The median income—and they pay taxes on that—is maybe \$25 an hour. This would be over \$30 an hour based on if we were just to divide up our welfare programs. So to say we should not examine those programs and ask ourselves can we do better is a mistake. The question I would ask is, can we improve it? Can we help more people move from dependence to independence? Is the program functioning as we would like it to function?

I have been asking questions of the Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. He provided some information that was very troubling to me. I have submitted additional information to him. Now we are not getting any more answers. They have just shut the door. The

Secretary basically said: Well, you are a Member of the Senate. You are asking too many questions. I am not giving you any more information. You raise concerns when I give you information. You point out problems. I do not like that. You are not getting any more.

I would note in some of our first inquiries in the examination of their program, we found they are on a determined effort to expand the number of people who get on welfare or food stamps even if they do not want to be on food stamps. One of the things that is interesting is they gave a person in western North Carolina, one of the agricultural people, an award for over-coming “mountain pride.” Basically what they said was this lady should be given an award because when people in the mountains who are independent and believe they can take care of themselves, thank you—without the Federal Government—she overcame that. They have a brochure telling people what to say when people say, I do not need food stamps, to get them to sign up for food stamps.

I have to say, and I am not happy about it. So now the Secretary has failed to comply with oversight requests from the Senate Budget Committee. Secretary Vilsack has missed the October deadline that we asked him to meet by nearly 2 months. My staff has been provided no update despite repeated requests, and apparently no letter is being drafted from the Department in response to our request. Just stiff you guys.

Well, last I heard he worked for the American people. So do I. And one of my jobs is to make sure the American people’s money is well spent. I am asking him about how he is spending our money, and he does not want to respond.

My letter asked questions about two main issues: First, the USDA’s acknowledged relationship with Mexico to place foreign nationals almost immediately on food stamps. One of the questions I asked was simply how the U.S. Department of Agriculture interprets the Federal law.

Well, we make Federal law, we pass laws. I would like to know how they are enforcing them and what standards they are using. Federal law says those likely to be reliant on welfare cannot be admitted to the United States. If they want to come to the United States, and they meet the qualifications, they get to come. But they have to show they are not going to be dependent on the government for their food, aid, and health and everything when they come.

We have lots of people who want to come to America. Most of those people probably can come and sustain themselves. Why would we be admitting those who can’t, who are going to immediately go on the government assistance programs? But this law is effectively not being enforced.

Senators GRASSLEY, HATCH, and ROBERTS are ranking members on key committees, and I sent a letter.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator’s time has expired.

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent for an additional 3 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. SESSIONS. So another question I asked was concerning the Department's goal to place more people on food stamps. Here is part of the question from the letter: According to USDA, "only 72 percent of those eligible for SNAP benefits participated," adding, "their communities lose out on the benefits provided by new SNAP dollars flowing into local economies."

If USDA's enrollment goals were reached, we asked, how many people would be receiving food stamps today? We have gone up dramatically; how many more would be of benefit? I would simply ask that question.

I will ask him again on the Senate floor. How many millions more people would be on the Food Stamp Program if 100 percent of those qualified had enrolled? In 2011 USDA gave a recruitment award, as I mentioned, for overcoming "mountain pride." They produced a pamphlet instructing their recruiters on how to "overcome the word 'no.'" The USDA claims the chief obstacle to recruitment is a "sense the benefits aren't needed." That is an obstacle.

USDA asserts that "everyone wins when eligible people take advantage of benefits to which they are entitled," claiming that "each \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates almost twice that amount in economic activity for the community."

Well, I guess we just ought to do it another fourfold. That would really make America prosperous.

USDA produced a Spanish-language ad in which the main character is pressured into accepting food stamps.

This is what is on the video: The lady said, "I don't need anyone's help. My husband earns enough to take care of us." Her friend mocks her and replies—this is the Department of Agriculture pitch—"When are you going to learn?" Eventually, she gives in to her friends who are pressuring her and agrees to enroll.

Is this the right approach for America? We need to work, to help people with pride, help people to assume their own independence, to be successful, take care of their own families and move them from dependence to independence. That ought to be the fundamental goal of our system. It was the goal in the reform of 1996 in the welfare reform that worked very well. More people prospered, fewer people are in poverty, and more people are taking care of themselves. It really was a success. We have been drifting back away from that.

What I sense is when you ask questions about it, you are treated as some- one who doesn't care about people who are hungry, who do need our help. We want to help. All we are asking is, Can't we do it better? Can't we look back to the principles of independence, individual responsibility, and individual pride that Americans have and nurture that and use that as a way to help reduce dependence in this country? So those are the things I wanted to share.

I would just say this: The Secretary of Agriculture has the responsibility to answer.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator's time has expired.

Mr. SESSIONS. I don't want to get in a fight with it, but, if necessary, I will use what ability I have in the Senate to insist that we get responses.