

Food stamp blues hit Congress

By Jeff Kirsch

What's that about food stamps? It was amazing. I started to believe what Agnew had said about the press. Editorials, analyses, news pieces...linking to the food stamp program to all that's bad in the American character. From first hand experience I knew that it wasn't true, but why lie?

The public, of course, needed little reason to believe anything critical of the food stamp program. So when legislation was introduced in the Senate in June 1975 to cut over 10 million people from the program, it picked up a considerable amount of press and support.

In reality, the legislation and the media campaign were only parts of a carefully run campaign, spearheaded by (now former) Sen. James Buckley (c/D-N.Y.) and orchestrated by Ronald Reagan's former welfare director in California.

The fever grew and a hostile press continued to plague those honestly trying to improve the food stamp program—turning them instead to efforts to keep it from being totally destroyed in the new hysteria.

The food stamp program had problems, certainly. There were errors; there was too much red tape; too many of the poor were excluded by administrative hassles and an inability to pay the purchase requirement.

►Not a "middle class" ripoff.

But, by no means had the program become a "middle class" ripoff of the public purse. Both the House Agriculture Committee and the Agriculture Department itself had revealed that most food stamp households were poor—a majority with gross incomes under \$3,420 a year and 95 percent with gross incomes under \$7,500.

True, the program had grown phenomenally, but most of that growth came with the economic hard times. It wasn't a program out of control; it was a program doing the job for which it was intended.

Last year's effort to "reform" the

food stamp program, largely by gutting its value to poor working households, was beaten back by a strange coalition, led in the Senate, for instance, by Senators Robert Dole (R-Kan.) and George McGovern (D-S.D.) and their Senate Select Committee on Nutrition. Likewise, President Ford's efforts to bypass Congress and implement cutbacks by executive fiat has been knocked down in federal court.

►New year, new Congress.

But it is a new year and once again Congress is on the case. The situation, however, is different this year and there is a chance that the food stamp program may actually be improved through legislative action.

First, the administration has changed. Agriculture secretary-designate Bob Bergland was a progressive force for food stamp reform in the House last year and there is every reason to anticipate a reasonable posture on legislative reform from his office. Certainly, a Carter administration is less likely to push for the severe cutbacks that Ford sought.

Last year the program was a symbol. Because of its visibility and vulnerability it was singled out for attack. Although the effort was beaten back it seriously damaged the public's perception of the program and the needs of those it serves.

Second, the media campaign to discredit the program has not been as evident over the last few months.

Third, it is not an election year so members of Congress are not as vulnerable to public and media attacks.

Fourth, the number of people receiving food stamps has dropped significantly—from a high of 19.4 million in May 1975 to 17 million last October. The cost has dropped correspondingly. There's not the sense of panic that existed last year. It's clearer that the program worked as it should and that it did not get "out of control."

Fifth and finally, the food stamp pro-

gram will be considered with the farm bill this year. In the past when farm and food stamps have been considered together, food stamp recipients have come out fairly well. Trade offs are more easily made between urban congressmen supporting certain farm provisions in return for the votes of farm states legislators on progressive food stamp provisions.

►Getting rid of purchase requirement.

There is one key reform for the anti-hunger advocates: elimination of the need for food stamp recipients to pay out large sums of their own money to buy their stamp allotment (the purchase price requirement). This provision, advocates point out, excludes millions of the poorest of the poor from receiving help.

Senators Dole and McGovern introduced legislation last year to eliminate the purchase requirement and they plan to push the idea again in the new Congress. Sen. Brooke (D-Mass.) has also introduced legislation for this purpose.

Failing to win the elimination of the purchase requirement, an important step for overall welfare reform, the progres-

sive forces will concentrate on preventing cutbacks, improving program operation and raising benefit levels.

►Backers also weaker in ways.

Of course, there are some ways in which food stamp backers are in a weaker situation. In the Senate, there is a good chance that the Senate Nutrition Committee, the major bulwark of the anti-hunger forces, will be a victim of a Senate reorganization drive.

In the House, Bergland's elevation to Agriculture secretary will weaken the progressive forces on the House Agriculture Committee. Bergland was a coordi-

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nating force for liberal and moderate elements on the committee in fighting the food stamp battle last year. The committee has also lost four other members who generally were favorable to the program, leaving chairman Thomas Foley (D-Wash.), himself a supporter of the program, with a very questionable majority when it comes to food stamp issues.

The conservatives in both the House and the Senate will be out to save money by lowering eligibility levels, limiting the participation of unemployed or laid off workers and the short-term poor and generally restricting the program to only the destitute.

Last year the food stamp program was a symbol. Because of its visibility and vulnerability it was singled out for attack by conservatives and by a president who needed conservative support to win his party's nomination. Although the effort was substantially unsuccessful, it seriously damaged the public's perception of the character of the program and the needs of the millions of poor and near-poor Americans it serves.

This year the cards may not be so stacked against the program and its supporters, but there is no denying that it will be an uphill battle to overcome the misperceptions and distortions of the last year and a half. No one would say that food stamps are the solution to hunger and want in America, but there is also no denying that they make a real difference to millions of needy citizens. ■

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Carter's farm policy—to support or not to support

By Sarah James
Washington Bureau

Washington. No one is expecting any big changes in farm legislation as the Congress considers renewal of the government's basic farm bill, the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973, which expires at the end of this year. Sen. Herman Talmadge (D-Ga.), chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee is expected to introduce a replacement bill that differs only slightly from the present one.

There may be some fight over the period covered by the bill, though. Talmadge wants new legislation to remain in effect for five years, while Washington sources say that President-elect Carter would prefer a one-year bill that would allow his administration to propose substantive changes.

While there may not be much conflict over the provisions of the new farm bill, there is considerable controversy over farm policy. Present, and presumably future, legislation is broad and leaves much to the discretion of the Secretary of Agriculture. This discretionary power allowed Earl Butz, secretary under Nixon and Ford, to drastically change agriculture policy from government subsidy and support for farmers to a market orientation stressing exports and increased production.

►Lots of vested interests.

The battle over agriculture policies in-

volves a wide range of vested interests, including small farmers, large agribusiness, grain operators, consumers and even opposing factions within the Agriculture Department. Farmers are generally split along lines that follow the size of their farm, the extent of their export contacts and their crop. These differences are also reflected in the three major farmer organizations.

The largest, and most conservative, is the American Farm Bureau. With over 2.5 million members, the AFB is dominated by the larger, more successful farmers. The other two, the National Farmers Union and the National Farmers Organization are smaller, both in membership and in the size of the farms they represent.

Generally speaking, the AFB favors the least possible government influence in the food market, while the NFO and the NFU call for greater government support.

One example of government support opposed by the AFB is the Commodity Credit Corporation, which loans farmers money on their crops, allowing them to withhold goods from the market in periods of low prices. The AFB argues that if the loan rates are raised, as has been proposed, farmers will not repay the loans, leaving the government with the crops. "Whatever goes into the hands of the government has to go out eventually," says Bob Donnelly of AFB. "The CCC does use the stockpiles to depress prices. The AFB believes the only way to avoid

this is to have lower price supports."

►Loans tied to costs.

Talmadge's proposed farm bill would change current policy and tie commodity loans to the actual costs of production; something that many small farmers see as necessary to their survival.

Those in favor of increased government support point out that without such "interference" in the market, many small farms will go bankrupt in coming years. Smaller farmers, they say, are less able to resist wildly fluctuating prices and need a relatively stable market to survive.

The National Farmers Organization argued in a statement of recommendations to the Senate Agriculture committee that since farm exports now account for over half of the foreign exchange needed to import oil, the entire population should share in the risks, as well as the benefits, of increased international trade. "In the absence of a stronger price support program, our government is placing an unfair burden of risk on American farmers when it calls for all-out production," the NFO said.

►NFU wants broad changes.

The National Farmers Union takes a different tack, arguing for broad changes in American farm policy. "Farm policy today must be redefined as farm and food policy.... What we do in the U.S. about farm and food policy may be as decisive as anything else ... in determining whether human civilization can surmount the crisis of population growth, of environ-

ment deterioration and social and political adjustment to industrialization and urbanization," the NFU said in a recent statement.

The NFU wants a policy geared to "Management of demand" for food rather than control of the food supply. "It is important," they say, "to recognize that demand for food rather than the supply of food is the real measure and arbiter of the adequacy of human nutrition." To make this policy possible they ask for national and international food reserves, protection against risks for farmers, increased aid to the poor at home and more food and economic aid to developing countries.

Ruth Kobell, legislative assistant for the NFU concedes that there is little chance that the NFU point of view will prevail this year. But Secretary-designate Bergland, a member of the NFU, is expected to lean toward farm supports. Clifford Ouse, Bergland's legislative aide for agriculture, who will probably accompany his boss to the Agriculture department, points out that "Farm debt is at an all time high. Farmers aren't in good shape. The only thing that has saved agriculture is the inflated value of land, which has allowed them to borrow more money. If a farmer has been lucky with crops, he's o.k., but now if you miss one crop, it will take a long time to catch up."

Ouse wouldn't be specific about Bergland's farm policy. "I don't know how fast action will be taken, but I do hope there will be rising price supports. We will have to be slow and deliberate." ■



New Englanders fight food dependency

Three-quarters of New England's food needs come from outside the area.

By Michael Scully

It was August. The roadside stand of a small New England farmer was shut down by the protest of a large supermarket on a zoning technicality. The supermarket was still selling California produce imported from 3,000 miles across the country. The farmer's fresh produce was grown in the same town, was being sold at lower prices and was attracting all the customers.

Local citizens went to the supermarket manager and suggested that at least he stock the produce of local farmers in season. The manager responded that his contract with Teamster truckers required year 'round patronage. They could cut him off at any time for violation, he said.

Only 30 years ago, some 35,000 farms in Massachusetts provided most of that state's food needs. Today only 6,000 farms remain. As post-war industrial investors flooded the region, speculative land values and resultingly higher taxes hit the small farmer hardest. Costs for energy, fertilizer and feed grain soared as control of those resources became more concentrated in monopolistic corporations. The price paid for farm goods began to be more and more determined by nationally-centralized buyers, and less determined by the actual costs of producing food. It all proved unbearable for Massachusetts farmers, and for thousands of others throughout the region.

Today, fully three quarters of New England's food needs, formerly supplied by local farmers, is imported from outside the region, mostly from California where 45 huge corporations control nearly two-thirds of the state's farm land. Urban consumers suffer as a result, paying the country's highest food prices—10 to 15 percent above national average in Boston.

"This high degree of dependency...can result in food emergencies whenever the usual pattern of distribution is disrupted," warns the Massachusetts Governor's Emergency Food Commission. Only a week's food supply is on hand at any given time in Boston.

Reversing or at least reducing the decline of native agriculture and the increasing dependence on outside sources has become a priority for New England leaders concerned with food and agriculture and several states are actively taking steps to change the situation.

"Our redevelopment of local agriculture is not an exercise in nostalgia, but is of economic necessity," says Massachusetts' agriculture commissioner Frederic Winthrop Jr. Through his leadership, Massachusetts is the first state in the country to adopt its own food and agriculture policy. Drafted with the input of farmers and consumers as well as public officials, the food policy outlines a plan of action for greater area food self-sufficiency through local control and redevelopment of local resources. In Vermont, which will soon be the second state to adopt an independent food policy, people call it "LIFE"—locally integrated food economy.

Maine, Connecticut and neighboring Pennsylvania are also initiating major farm promotion programs, and the states are beginning to seek cooperation with one another on a regional basis as well.

Nor is New England agriculture just a rural concern. "Urban folks have a critical stake in building ties with area farmers," says inner-city state Rep. Mel King (Boston), who is pushing greater urban awareness of agriculture and related rural concerns. "The city's long range food security may well depend upon the redevelopment of regional agriculture as a healthy industry, and an economic alternative."

At the current rate of conversion of farm lands to other uses, Massachusetts could lose virtually all of its remaining farmland by 1985. But enough farm land is left, to substantially rebuild its in-



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ternal food economy. The problem is economic, particularly high tax rates.

Many states already have some form of tax law that protects farm lands from being taxed at the higher industrial assessment rates. But this alone has not halted the rapid conversion of farm land to industrial, residential or other uses.

"Public purchase of my land development rights is the only way I can hold onto my farm," observes a Connecticut farmer, his eyes rolling across the pastures that were his grandfather's. "I wouldn't have to sell out the land to speculators to get my retirement money, and would have immediate cash for the farm operation as long as I'm here."

Public purchase of farm land development rights is emerging in at least five northeast states with the support of farmers. Under the plan, the public pays farmers the difference between a tract's higher potential development value and its lower base agricultural value. The contract is a voluntary one for individual farmers who still retain legal title and rights—except for the right to develop the land for nonfarm purposes.

Then the land could not be taxed at anything but actual farm value because the development right would be eliminated. The general public, in turn, would have contracted for a more secure local food source with the farmer who wants to keep farming. The farmer can still sell the agricultural title to his land or have someone else farm it, but the land will remain in food production.

Many more young people, families and cooperative households who want to get into farming might be able to do so under the plan. Those previously lacking enough money to buy farms would now be paying only the base price when buying farm land.

Idle public lands owned by state agencies have also been opened for cultivation to the general public in Massachusetts. Some 50 Massachusetts cities and towns also run programs on municipal lands.

"We created several paying summer jobs here that wouldn't have existed otherwise," says Sandy Matathia who organizes his dormitory into a farm co-operative on state university land in rural Amherst. "We sold the produce to the

cafeteria as we harvested, which was served to students at meals." The farm co-op wants to expand next year by revitalizing a fallowing orchard on campus.

Hundreds of neighborhood kids showed up to spread the tons of topsoil one recent Saturday morning over five new farm sites—all vacant lots—in Boston's multiracial South End.

A group of citizens had secured the topsoil from a nearby state excavation, obtained use of the city-owned vacant lots, then arranged for the state national guard to truck the topsoil to the sites. Planting was underway in a week. Those who had no tools improvised. People who never realized their gardening skills were suddenly growing as much as \$500 worth of food on 20x30-foot plots. The previously garbage-strewn lots are now attractive green living spaces in the South End, economically productive to those who live there.

As basic food production is expanded on local farm lands of all types, storage and support services have had to be developed to extend seasonal supplies of local-grown foods and to extend jobs created around them.

A group of women in Northampton, Mass., decided last spring that what the farmers and gardeners of Hampshire county needed was a community canning center. They obtained a \$43,000 grant from a state agency and set up the public canning facility inside the county courthouse. Area farmers and gardeners made great use of the service, which remained in operation until December. They plan to do it again this year.

Women in Agriculture, the group that organized the center, is an offshoot of the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women that decided to deal with the economic development of women within New England's overall redevelopment of agriculture. "We're out to open farm training and process-apprenticeship to females of all ages," explains Pat Sackrey. "Women should have options beyond traditionally exclusive roles as farmwives."

Not least among the support services needed to develop a regional agriculture is the need for locally produced organic fertilizer. The turning of metropolitan

Boston's 80,000 annual tons of sewage into marketable fertilizer is sought by leading legislators. Massachusetts environment secretary Evelyn Murphy has appointed a commission to press for the agricultural use of manure from a horse track, as well as the use of other institutional "wastes." Such moves are seen as critical in alleviating dependence upon imported petroleum-based fertilizers.

Getting the multi-billion dollar regional consumer market to give preference to local foods will be a decisive factor needed to stabilize and expand the regional food infrastructure.

Public institutions and schools everywhere spend millions of dollars on food consumption. Exploring and negotiating ways to get them to give preference to locally grown foods is a task force made up of farmers, consumers, and state officials. Appointed by Winthrop, this is one of a series of task forces trying to bring more popular participation to the state department of agriculture.

Other efforts are addressed at expanding direct sales from local farmers to local consumers—eliminating middlemen and cutting energy costs. With more domestic marketing of local foods both farm and consumer prices would be more directly related to actual production costs. Some 60 percent of every American consumer dollar at present goes to middlemen.

Pennsylvania's Secretary of Agriculture says that if at least 20 percent of Pennsylvania's consumer food purchases were directly from state farmers, it would be competitive enough to force supermarket prices down. To achieve this goal he supports the development of urban consumer food co-ops, which are more likely to patronize local farmers.

Mel King smiles sometimes when he talks of the great potentials of agriculture in his part of the country. "We may never be completely self-sufficient in food, but it is to the degree that we move in that direction that farmers, consumers and urban folks alike can realize greater food security and economic health."

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