

February 6, 2024

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair, Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Susan Collins
Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger
Chairwoman, Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Collins, Chairwoman Granger and Ranking Member DeLauro:

As Congress finalizes its work on the Fiscal Year 2024 bill for Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, the undersigned organizations write in strong opposition to language that would impede the ability and dignity of individuals to choose the groceries they feel are best for their families.

The House Agriculture Appropriations bill included \$2 million for five pilot projects that would restrict SNAP purchases to only those that fall under the “nutrient dense” definition in the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans which describes those foods as rich in vitamins, minerals, healthy fats, and fibers relative to calories. However, the Dietary Guidelines do not provide an exhaustive list of foods that meet that criteria and instead encourages individuals to consume a balanced diet of a variety of foods – sound nutrition advice that has long been accepted.

Dividing SNAP food items into a complex system of variable, government-administered lists from among the 40,000 items in a grocery store would be confusing to both customers and retailers and would ultimately increase the cost of administering the program for retailers that accept SNAP benefits. This would particularly burden smaller retailers in rural and urban markets.

Whether a pilot or a statewide or national restriction, stores would be particularly burdened by managing the data and determination of eligibility for the more than 20,000 new food and beverage items introduced each year, requiring programming any updates into computer systems to ensure compliance. Store associates would have to attempt to explain the restrictions to customers leading to confusion. Managing a SNAP-eligible foods list would be an unending task that would have to be staffed and maintained, and communicated to retailers, customers, and manufacturers on a real-time basis.

Defining foods as “in” or “out” based on the government definition of nutrient density means picking winners and losers for families simply trying to feed their families. USDA has rejected state requests across various administrations to pilot restrictions of specific types of foods within SNAP due to the complexity and costs it would add to the program. Additionally, federal dietary guidance applies to a total diet, not individual foods. This, too, is long accepted sound nutritional advice.

Furthermore, most customers paying with SNAP benefits are supplementing those food purchases with another form of tender – cash, WIC, TANF or debit card. In those instances, any restrictions could be complicated for store personnel based on the location of the item on the conveyor belt and which form of payment is accessed first in the order. This would complicate and slow the transactions for both customers and retailers.

The data is clear that SNAP already improves diet-related health outcomes. Adults who had access to SNAP during childhood exhibit lower adult obesity risk and other lower risk of chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.¹ If the federal government were to put in place a single list of eligible products or ineligible products, it would be easier for those rules to change from state-to-state, county-to-county, or administration-to-administration—deepening the complexity. Since its inception as a program, there have been several attempts to impose a wide variety of restrictions including those on certain dairy foods, frozen foods, imported foods, meats, seafood, cake mixes, snack foods, and carbonated or sugar-sweetened beverages.

We should not lose ground on the efficiencies that have been added to SNAP and the dignity it provides to SNAP recipients. Much of the stigma that used to be attached to participation in SNAP stemmed from the visibility participants received when redeeming paper “food stamp” coupons in a supermarket line. Implementation of EBT technology and online SNAP have enhanced the dignity experienced by SNAP customers along with the efficiencies of administration. Implementing restrictions is a step backwards, reducing both the efficiencies of the program and the dignity of SNAP customers, most of whom are experiencing a short-term need, and are already struggling to feed their families.

In a recent poll, most likely voters agree that the government should not interfere with people’s food choices (65%) or take away people’s autonomy by adding even more limitation on their choices (73%). An additional 2022 survey of individuals facing hunger, 87% agreed that if Congress passes policies to reduce hunger and food insecurity, it is important that these policies support people’s dignity and choices in what they feed their families. Restricting options in SNAP removes autonomy and dignity by limiting the ability to make personal choices about one’s diet, including foods that are culturally appropriate or meet dietary restrictions. SNAP recipients, like all people, should be trusted and empowered to make their own food selections.

As you finalize your work on the FY24 Agriculture Appropriations bill, we encourage you to maintain the long-held policy position that recipients should be allowed to buy the foods best suited for their families rather than allowing government to make those choices for them.

Sincerely,

American Bakers Association
American Beverage Association
American Frozen Food Institute
Can Manufacturers Institute
Congressional Hunger Center

¹ Hoynes H, Schanzenbach DW, Almond D. Long-Run Impacts of Childhood Access to the Safety Net. *Am Econ Rev.* 2016;106(4):903-934 (n.d.)

Consumer Brands Association
Equitable Spaces
Feeding America
FMI – the Food Industry Association
Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
Grubhub
International Dairy Foods Association
The Kroger Co.
National Confectioners Association
National Grocers Association
National Milk Producers Federation
North American Millers' Association
Share our Strength
SNAC International

CC: Majority Leader Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader Mitch McConnell
Speaker Mike Johnson
Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries
Sen. Martin Heinrich
Sen. John Hoeven
Rep. Andy Harris
Rep. Sanford Bishop, Jr.