

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 27, 2013 at 2:31pm

White House, farm advocates talk about SNAP; silence from Congress

by Mark Pattison by Catholic News Service

Washington — As the Thanksgiving holiday neared, both the White House and Catholic Rural Life raised the specter of possible huge cuts in funding for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

But the silence from the House-Senate conference committee working on the farm bill -- which includes funding for SNAP -- and the abbreviated work schedule for Congress leaving little time in December for lawmakers to arrive at a compromise mean the specter could still be present as Christmas nears. The latest extension of the farm bill expires New Year's Day

The compromise could determine how deep the cuts are to SNAP, formerly known as food stamps. The Senate's version of the farm bill slices \$4 billion over the next 10 years. The House's version would slash nearly \$40 billion over the same time period.

"SNAP is one of our nation's strongest defenses against hunger and poverty," said Cecilia Munoz, director of the White House's Domestic Policy Council, in a teleconference Tuesday with reporters.

"At a time when people are about to sit around the table with their families to celebrate a meal, it's hardly seems the right time to be pulling food off the table for millions of our neighbors and fellow Americans," added Gene Sperling, director of the National Economic Council and a White House assistant to the president for economic policy.

"I can't see them breaking the farm bill apart," said Bob Gronski, a policy adviser for Catholic Rural Life. "Deal with this, this and this, but resolve nutrition at a separate time? Everything is just very unclear."

Gronski took note of the virtual news blackout when it comes to the conference committee. "I'm not even sure they've been meeting," Gronski said in telephone interview Nov. 26, when Congress was in its Thanksgiving recess.

He told Catholic News Service he had heard that conferees' staff members, along with their counterparts on the House and Senate Agriculture committees, were working at reconciling some parts of each chamber's respective farm bills "but saving the big details like SNAP for the committee members."

During the teleconference Munoz told reporters SNAP has reduced child poverty rate by 3 percentage points, "larger than anything other than refundable tax credits" among federal poverty-reduction measures. Of those who receive benefits, 91 percent live below the poverty line, she added. "Administrative costs are only 5 percent of the program. And the payment accuracy rate is the highest it's ever been, which puts it at the highest of all government programs," she said.

A Congressional Budget Office analysis of poverty-reduction measures used as the nation comes out of a recession revealed that SNAP was "one of the two most effective," Sperling said. "They agreed with the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) that every SNAP dollar develops up to \$1.80 in economic activity."

A White House document issued Nov. 26, "Supporting Families, Strengthening Communities: The Economic Importance of Nutrition Assistance," said SNAP kept nearly 5 million people out of poverty, including 2.2 million children. And, to counter arguments that SNAP fosters dependency on government, the document said, "Among SNAP households with at least one working-age, non-disabled adult, more than half work -- and more than 80 percent work in the year before or after receiving SNAP."

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Josh Earnest, the White House's principal deputy press secretary, said Nov. 26 in Los Angeles that if the House version of the SNAP cuts were to become law, "4 million Americans would lose access to SNAP benefits."

Sperling said the cuts also would result in an estimated 217,000 children becoming ineligible for free school lunches, as some states and school districts use SNAP eligibility as a factor in qualifying for the free school lunch program.

Gronski lamented the state of affairs in Congress. "Farmers need to make (planting) decisions. Nutrition programs need to be taken care of," he told CNS. "We did this (stalemate) one year ago. Did we have to go through it again? It makes Congress look bad. It makes the House look bad."

He said Congress could approve yet another farm bill extension, but noted that Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, was on record against a further extension. Without a new bill or an extension of the current law by year's end, a 1949 law kicks in that could send dairy prices skyrocketing.

"If Congress doesn't hit that target, hit that deadline," Gronski said, "it's really going to be a mess."

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