

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

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COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE

CHIEF DEPUTY WHIP

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1309

January 12, 2012

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The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I am writing to urge you to use your administrative authority to make sure that USDA is utilizing all possible resources to make bonus and specialty crop purchases as quickly as possible to benefit TEFAP and support our nation's food banks. As our country continues to experience prolonged high unemployment and millions more Americans are working but facing reduced wages and hours and struggling to feed their families, the need for emergency food assistance remains at record levels.

Food banks in Illinois and across the nation are stretched thin meeting the sustained high demand and many of them face the prospect of bare shelves. The Greater Chicago Food Depository alone has seen a 57 percent rise in food pantry visits over the last three years. In my congressional district, there are 14 Food Depository member pantries that rely on USDA commodities through TEFAP to help nearly 10,000 families put food on the table each month. While food banks receive generous donations from individuals and corporations to help those in need, USDA commodities are a vital source of nutritious food and food banks cannot meet the need in their communities without TEFAP commodities. In my state of Illinois, food banks rely on TEFAP for about 30 percent of the food they distribute.

Declines in TEFAP commodities due to strong agricultural markets have resulted in greatly reduced supplies of surplus agricultural products. In FY 2010, TEFAP provided approximately \$655 million worth of healthy and nutritious food. In FY 2011, according to preliminary figures, that number declined by 30 percent or \$196 million and my understanding is that based on economic forecasts, those declines are expected to continue in FY 2012 if action is not taken.

While SNAP is the centerpiece of the federal nutrition assistance safety net, nearly 23 million Americans are food insecure yet have incomes too high to allow them to qualify for SNAP. Others who are enrolled on SNAP find that their monthly benefits are running out before the end of the month. Food banks are essential to ensuring that those individuals and families can put food on the table. Without regular and adequate supplies of TEFAP commodities, many food banks will be unable to fully meet this need. In a recent meeting with the Greater Chicago Food Depository, I learned that they have already seen a four million pound

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decline of TEFAP commodities in the first six months of their fiscal year. This gap in food for distribution is too big to be filled by increased private donations.

I appreciate the steps you and your team at USDA have taken over the past several months to make Section 32 bonus purchases and specialty crop purchases to help shore up the available supply of TEFAP commodities. Moving forward in FY2012, I strongly urge you to continue being proactive with regard to TEFAP purchases, applying bonus purchase criteria as liberally as possible and making specialty crop purchases early and often.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to hearing from you about this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jan Schakowsky", is written over the printed name and title.

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress