

Congressman Jimmy Panetta Oral Testimony
House Agriculture Committee Member Day
December 11, 2019

Thank you, Chairman Peterson and Ranking Member Conaway for your opening statements and for giving Members the opportunity to speak today. I am particularly glad that we will be hearing from Members who are *not* on our Committee – because the issues we discuss on the Agriculture Committee affect families in every district across the country.

Among those issues – unfortunately – is this Administration’s series of attacks against the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as CalFresh in my communities on the central coast of California. Through the rulemaking process, the Trump Administration is working to limit states’ ability to administer SNAP, even though this Committee rejected those changes and, just one year ago, Congress passed a bipartisan Farm Bill that maintains the integrity of SNAP.

These proposals are estimated to negatively impact over a million Californians, including the many Hispanic families who call the central coast of California their home. Over the past weeks and months, I have led my California colleagues in writing to USDA and expressing serious concerns about each of these proposals. My constituents and hundreds of thousands of other individuals have also written to USDA to oppose these changes. And yet, USDA has continued with an agenda to weaken support systems for low-income Americans who are working hard to elevate their economic status.

Just last week, USDA finalized a rule that will limit states’ ability to waive work requirements for able-bodied adults with dependents, or ABAWDs. Nearly every state, including my state of California, has opted to use the work requirements waiver at some point, particularly during periods of lengthy economic recession. If implemented, the ABAWD rule will cut off basic food assistance for nearly 700,000 of the nation’s poorest people.

I’d like to shed some light on who these people are – beyond the glaring statistics I have already mentioned. A majority of ABAWDs are people who do not have a high school diploma, people who are homeless, and people who are in poor health. Many of these individuals get up and go to work every day – but oftentimes, their jobs are unstable, with fluctuating or intermittent hours and few benefits.

I am also very concerned that USDA has not properly analyzed the impact of SNAP rules on minority populations. Last month, Naomi Earp, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at USDA, testified before our Nutrition and Oversight Subcommittee. When I asked Ms. Earp about the Civil Rights Impact Analysis, or CRIA, on SNAP rulemaking – which falls under her purview – she told me that the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights has “no role in rulemaking.” When I asked her if she had reviewed the CRIA associated with one of the SNAP rules, she told me that the CRIA is a neutral tool, and it does not signal to the Department whether or not it should proceed with the rule. I am deeply concerned by Ms. Earp’s incorrect approach to her job – and the impact of her actions, or lack thereof, on my constituents who rely on CalFresh.

By circumventing Congress and bypassing an important opportunity to assess the impact of these rules, USDA is escalating this Administration's war on working families. Today, as families across the country are preparing for another holiday season, I rise to speak out against this rule – and implore the Administration to rethink its decision and instead allow us to return to the program that we all voted for in this room just one year ago when we passed the Farm Bill.