



CONGRESSWOMAN JENNIFFER GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN

PUERTO RICO - AT LARGE

Remarks
Member Day Hearing
House Committee on Agriculture
Wednesday, December 6, 2023. 1300 Longworth HOB

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Scott, thank you for the opportunity to testify in today's Member Day hearing to highlight some of Puerto Rico's priorities under the jurisdiction of the House Committee on Agriculture.

As you know, Puerto Rico is not included in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. Instead, the Island offers federal nutrition assistance to low-income families through the Nutrition Assistance Program, or NAP, which is a capped block grant program funded every year by Congress.

With NAP, U.S. citizens living in Puerto Rico receive fewer benefits compared to their SNAP counterparts. We also depend on Congress to allocate additional emergency funds through supplemental legislation in the event of a natural disaster, or other national emergencies. This challenges the rate of response on the ground and produces uncertainty as state agency officials and Island residents are unaware of what, if any, disaster resources will be available when needed.

SNAP, on the other hand, would ensure residents in Puerto Rico, like those living in the 50 States, DC, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam, are properly supported when in need of assistance to cover their dietary expenses. SNAP also has built-in tools to bolster the economy, like work requirements. Some estimates show that, if Puerto Rico were included in SNAP and therefore in compliance with work requirements, approximately 266,000 residents would be brought into the workforce.¹ These are significant numbers that show why there is ample support, from both the public and private sectors, for the transition from NAP to SNAP.

It is also important to highlight the potential impact of this change on agricultural communities across the country. Puerto Rico imports close to 80% of the food it consumes, and most of those items come from the states. Some of the import categories include poultry, meat, dairy, cereals, among others, with the mainland being the top supplier and seller.²

¹ From NAP to SNAP: Bridge to Economic Liberty for Residents of Puerto Rico (an update). <https://institutodelibertadeconomica.org/en/publications/from-nap-to-snap-a-bridge-to-economic-liberty-for-residents-of-puerto-rico/>

² Economic Contributions of the Food & Beverage Industry in Puerto Rico. Macro Policy Advisors. February 2021. <https://puertoricosnap.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ECONOMIC-CONTRIBUTIONS-OF-THE-FOOD-BEVERAGE-INDUSTRY-PUERTO-RICO-4859-5257-1968-1.pdf>

Earlier this year, I introduced legislation that would help us achieve participation in SNAP: H.R. 253, the Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Fairness Act. This bill is bipartisan, bicameral, and supported by all stakeholders on the Island. It supports the transition and a timeframe for both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to undertake this change in full compliance with programmatic requirements under SNAP.

Puerto Rico has been excluded from SNAP since the early 1980s³. And yet, the unsuitability of NAP continues to be apparent. NAP is one of the main programs Island residents turn to when there is an economic downturn or emergency, impacting their work hours and their livelihood, and yet, they are shortchanged compared to their SNAP counterparts.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, I urge you to take the opportunity with the upcoming Farm Bill to address this issue and support greater nutrition assistance and security for Puerto Rico.

Lastly, I have other priorities that would foster greater research opportunities for some of our specialty crops, bananas and plantains, cacao, and mangos. These are staple items in our diet and our agriculture economy. I have introduced legislation that would add these crops as priority research areas for USDA. These are H.R. 1455, the Plantain and Banana Plant Health and Initiative Act; H.R. 154, the Cacao Tree Health Initiative Act; and H.R.3856, the Mango Plant Health Initiative Act. Including these bills within the upcoming Farm Bill would have a remarkably positive impact on our abilities to conduct research of these crops, mainly the pests and plant diseases that threaten them, and how to mitigate these.

I would like to conclude my remarks by thanking both of you, Chairman Thompson, and Ranking Member Scott for your time, as well as your dedicated staff who have been working alongside mine for many years on all the issues I have mentioned today.

Thank you and I yield back.

³ USDA FNS- Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Program Summary. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nap/puerto-rico-nutrition-assistance-program-summary>