



Testimony of Carrie Calvert  
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Before the Committee on Agriculture  
Subcommittee on Nutrition  
U.S. House of Representatives  
March 21, 2017

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McGovern, and members of the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, thank you for inviting me to testify on the importance of The Emergency Food Assistance Program, also known as TEFAP. I represent Feeding America, which is the nation's largest anti-hunger nonprofit, serving 46 million people each year through our network of almost 200 food bank members. Our network serves every state in the country as well as the District of Columbia. Our food banks support over 60,000 food distribution agencies, such as food pantries, after school and summer programs, senior meal sites, and soup kitchens. We have a network of 2 million volunteers and we are proud to say that we provide 4 billion meals annually to people in need. Our mission is to not only provide emergency food assistance to those in need today, but to engage the country in the fight to end hunger, so that we can reduce the number of families that must rely on charitable food assistance tomorrow.

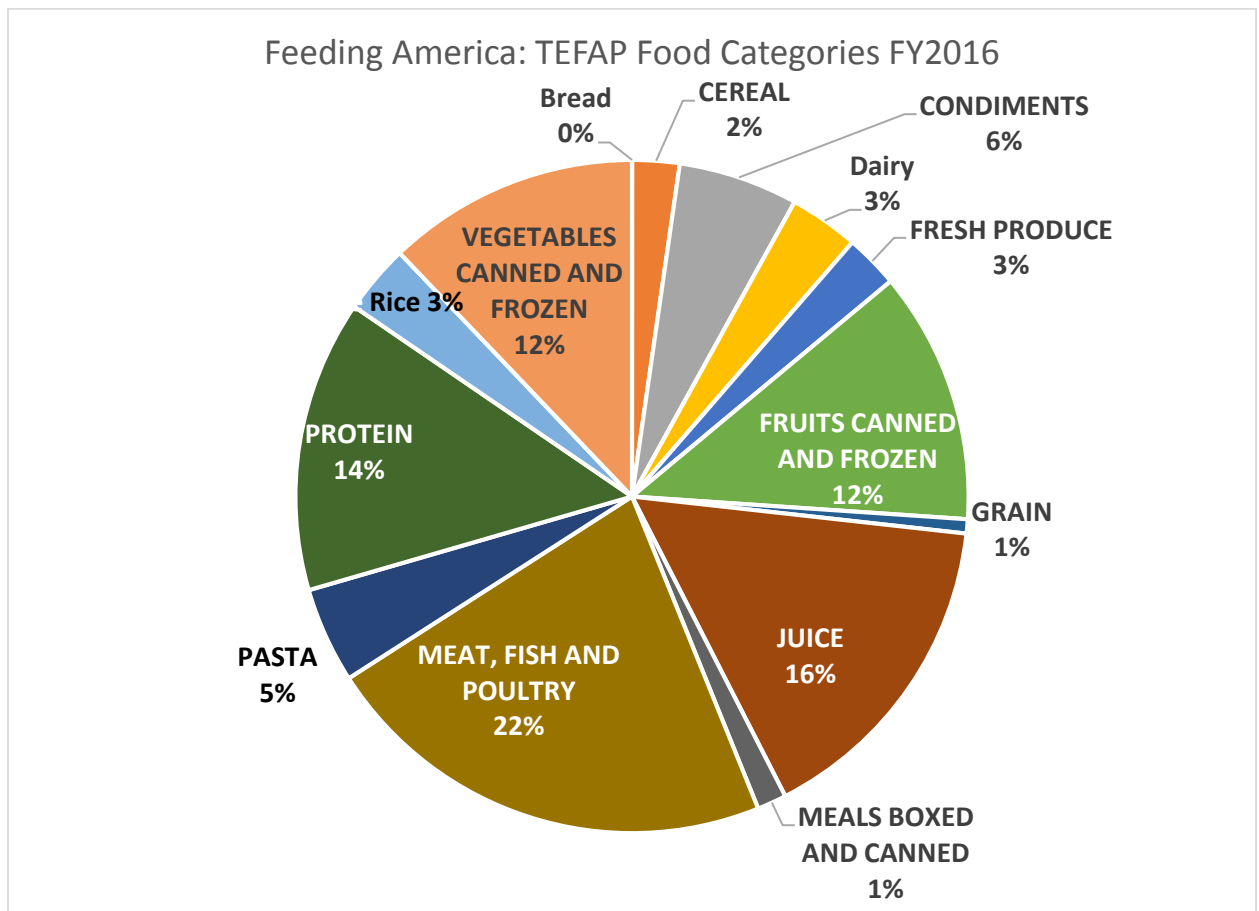
Since its inception in the early 1980's as a program to connect surplus commodity products with emergency feeding organizations, TEFAP has served a dual purpose of providing nutritious food to the nation's charitable community while supporting US grown commodities. As the program proved its efficacy and efficiency, it expanded to become an essential part of how food banks and other local organizations provide food to people in need. Today, the Emergency Food Assistance Program is the backbone of the charitable food system with an impact that is felt in every state across the country.

The Feeding America network receives food from federal commodity programs like TEFAP and CSFP, as well as through food donation partnerships with thousands of growers, food manufacturers, retailers, and food service companies across America. We also purchase some of the food we distribute as well when there is a shortfall. Feeding America food banks received 723 million pounds of food from TEFAP in FY 2016, accounting for about 600 million meals.

These are meals that go straight into the effort to fight against hunger and to relieve food insecurity, but should be viewed as part of an integral array of federal nutrition programs. We know the community members we help are also often relying on SNAP, school lunch, WIC, or senior meals to meet their families' needs. Our work would not be possible without the continued

strong support of federal nutrition programs. In fact, Feeding America’s entire food distribution in one year equals only 10% of the food provided by the SNAP program. We know from Feeding America’s Hunger in America 2014 report that although 55% of the people we serve participate at some time in the SNAP program, another 45% do not. Some of that population is likely eligible yet not participating, but millions of others make too much to qualify for SNAP assistance, yet still need charitable food assistance. This is where strong funding for TEFAP is essential to our ability to fulfill our mission.

TEFAP works by directly supplying nutritious food purchased by USDA to charities, such as Feeding America food banks. In addition to the food, USDA also provides funding to defray some of the storage and distribution costs of getting the food to hungry Americans. As you can see from the pie chart, the foods provided through TEFAP are highly nutritious and represent household pantry staples, foods that you would find in your kitchen. Our food banks combine TEFAP foods with other donated and purchased food to give food insecure Americans access to a nutritionally well-balanced grocery package.



There are two categories of TEFAP commodities, mandatory and bonus commodities. Mandatory commodities are paid for through mandatory funding authorized directly in the Farm Bill. Food banks, working with their state agencies, order food directly from USDA, which contracts with food producers to achieve significant cost savings. This is a highly efficient purchasing program. Each pound of nutritious food by USDA costs about 64 cents.<sup>i</sup> Food banks

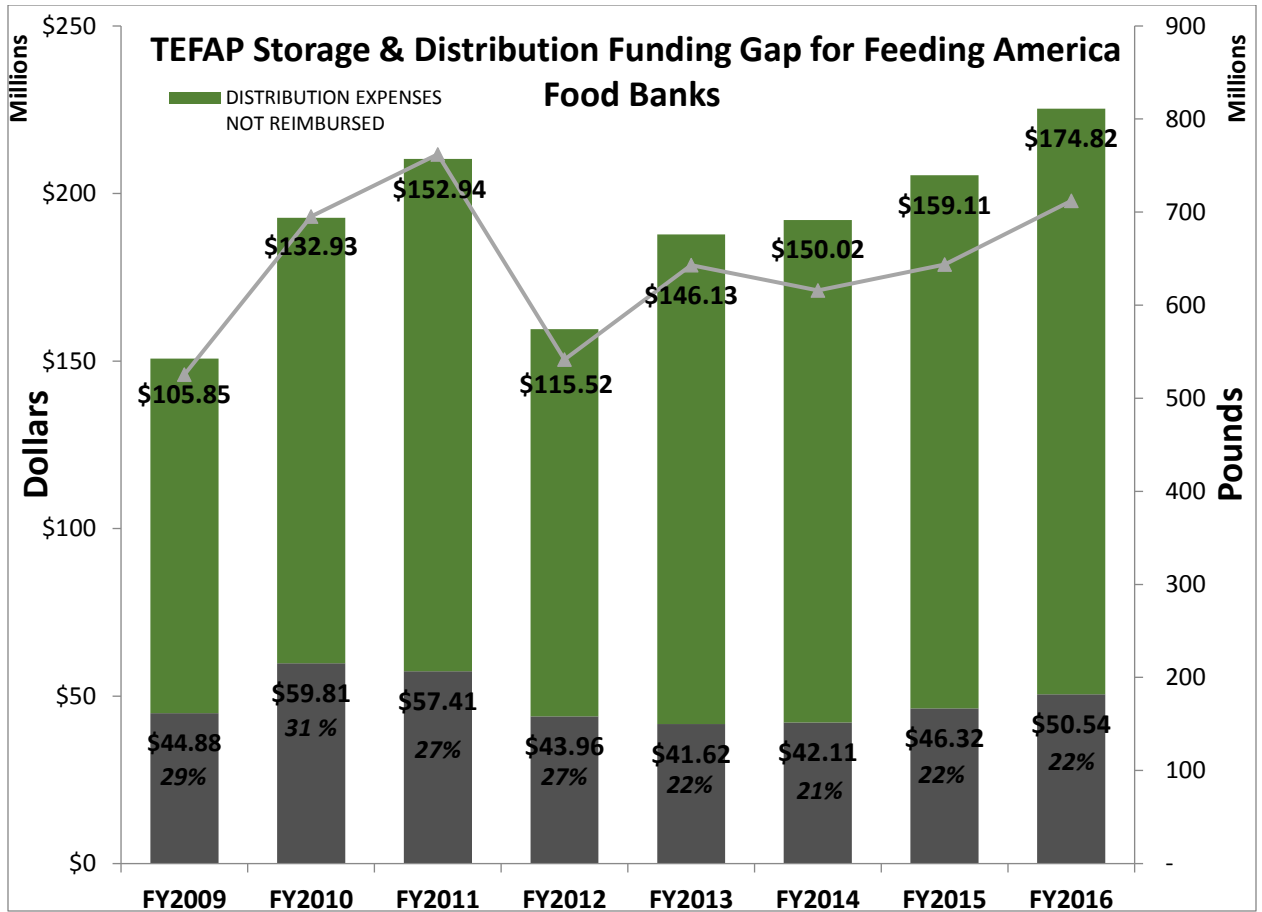
select these foods from a long menu of options made available by USDA. Mandatory spending is essentially demand driven.

TEFAP Bonus commodity purchases are driven by the need for commodity support as prices for commodity foods fluctuate. When the price of an agriculture commodity falls so low that the market for it is in danger, the Department of Agriculture spends money to purchase enough of that commodity to stabilize the market. These purchased foods are then distributed through the TEFAP program to those who need a helping hand. This is a highly-efficient public-private partnership, supporting agricultural markets, while allowing for the purchase of nutritious food when it is at a very low price point. In FY 2016, USDA made additional purchases under its market support authority of \$297.44 million worth of food.<sup>ii</sup>

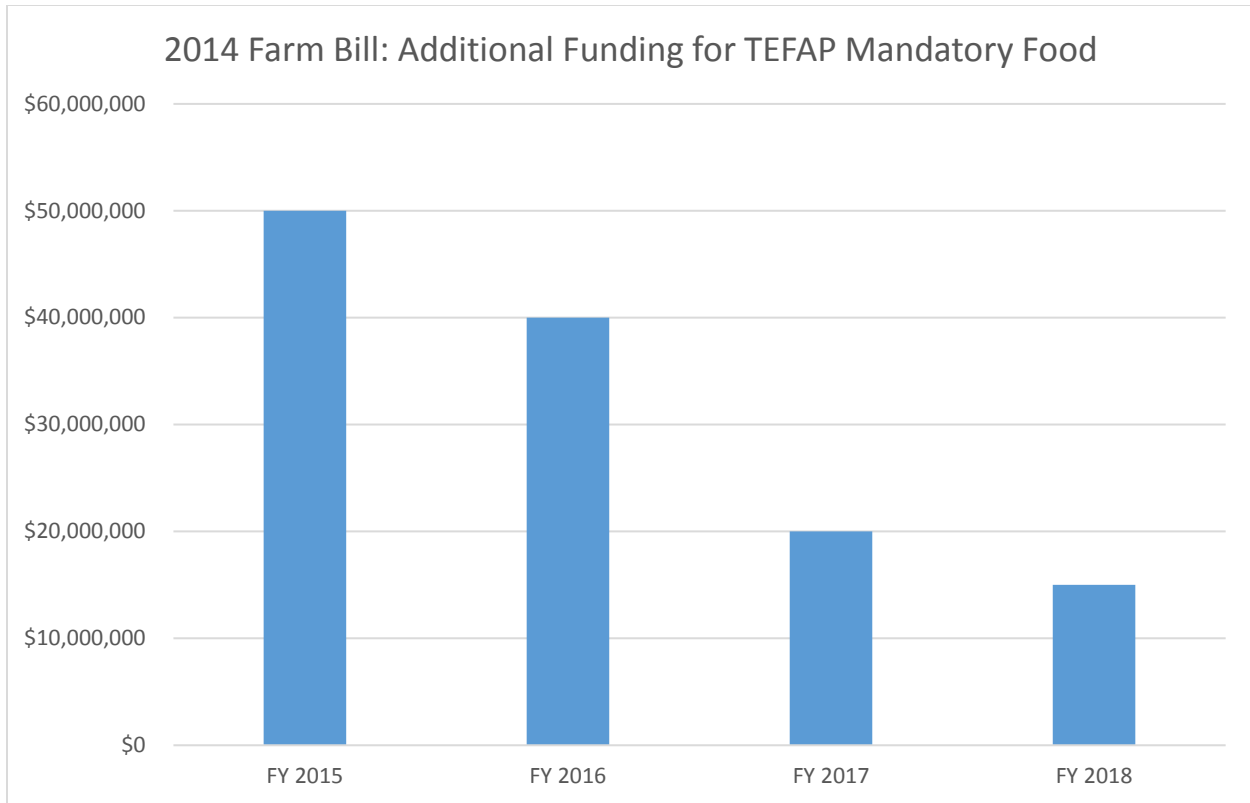
The farm bill also authorizes funds to support the storage and distribution of TEFAP commodities, although this is not mandatory funding and depends on an annual appropriation. These are dollars spent to help defray the cost of storing commodities and then moving them to the distribution point so they can be accessed by our clients.

Unfortunately, the funds Congress has historically appropriated for the purposes of TEFAP storage and distribution are significantly less than the costs incurred by our food bank members. For years now, Congress has appropriated these critical funds at around half of the authorized level of \$100 million annually. TEFAP storage and distribution's current funding level of \$54 million only covers 23% of the cost to our food banks of distributing TEFAP commodities – leaving food banks to cover the difference. This is especially acute in food banks with larger service areas and which are serving rural populations.

Food banks help to make up the shortfall for the storage and distribution costs by redirecting funding that would otherwise go to other initiatives they run, such as veteran's programs and school weekend back pack programs. If Congress were to appropriate the full authorized amount of storage and distribution funds, food charities would have additional resources to provide services in their communities. The chart below illustrates the costs our food banks report to us, and the small amount that is offset by TEFAP storage and distribution.



TEFAP foods and funds are distributed to states on the basis of relative poverty and unemployment levels. In FY 2016, Congress provided \$318 million in funding for TEFAP food purchases,<sup>iii</sup> down from \$327 million in FY 2015.<sup>iv</sup> This occurred because the 2014 Farm Bill called for the gradual reduction of additional program funding. Because of the reduction in funding, most states saw their TEFAP dollars shrink. The 2014 Farm Bill provided an additional \$205 million in TEFAP funding over ten years. The chart below shows the impact this funding has had. While we are grateful for the additional funding, the idea behind front loading the funds was to provide assistance when demand was highest. As our food banks can attest, the economic recovery has been uneven for many of the working poor that we serve, and they continue to respond to a high degree of demand. We would urge you to consider methods to address the need for additional TEFAP support in a more stable manner in the next farm bill.



The food charities that distribute TEFAP foods are subject to government oversight to ensure that the commodities are reaching low-income consumers. State agencies develop uniform statewide criteria for determining recipient eligibility.<sup>v</sup> Local charities are required to prove that they serve predominantly needy communities. States are required to regularly review local charities to ensure effective and efficient program operations. USDA conducts Management Evaluations of states deemed to be at the highest risk of program deficiency.

In addition to the oversight from USDA and state agencies, Feeding America contractually requires all of our food bank members to undergo audits by our compliance team to ensure all federal, state and local regulations are complied with and that the food bank is operating in a financially responsible manner. We also require a third party food safety audit to ensure that we are distributing food in a way that protects clients from potential food borne illness, which is especially important as the amount of perishable food we distribute has increased.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program illustrates how a government program, nonprofits, and the private sector can work together to provide targeted, accessible, and cost efficient food assistance that is responsive to immediate need in local communities. TEFAP is a very responsive program, because it can be accessed by struggling families and individuals on an as needed basis. After a sudden emergency leaves a family without money, there is a place to turn. For many of the people we serve, the need for food assistance can be episodic and due to unexpected expenses, such as a car breaking down or a sudden layoff. TEFAP helps fill the gaps when this happens.

A story by CBS reported that most Americans said they would be unable to handle a sudden \$500 car repair bill.<sup>vi</sup> As we have seen, the lack of well-paying jobs has left more people living closer to the margin than they have ever before. Many are just one bad day away from suddenly experiencing that strange sense of going from the middle class, to wondering how they will feed their family.

TEFAP provides a stop gap measure by empowering local organizations to provide immediate food. This food is there today and is available tonight. This sort of immediate response is so important, because people live their lives day-by-day and not by government timelines. By being there when people need it, TEFAP can be the steady hand that keeps a family stable through an emergency.

TEFAP food is also very healthy. Research conducted by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service found that TEFAP provides extremely nutritious foods. In fact, using the Healthy Eating Index, a tool developed by USDA to measure diet quality, the food distributed through TEFAP earned a score of 89 out of 100. By comparison the overall US food supply scored only 55 out of 100.<sup>vii</sup>

The availability of nutritious foods is highly important to our clients. According to our Hunger in America study, 79% of client households report having bought the cheapest food available, regardless of its nutritional content.<sup>viii</sup> This is especially concerning, because nearly half (47%) of our client households that contain seniors have a member with diabetes.<sup>ix</sup> Feeding America works hard to provide those we serve with food that is healthy and filling.

As the Subcommittee works on a new farm bill, we look forward to working with you to demonstrate how strong support for nutrition programs and agriculture programs can strengthen communities nationwide. We know that for many of America's growers, this has been a difficult time with low commodity prices leading to many challenges in rural America.

One of the misconceptions about food insecurity in America is that it is only an urban problem; in fact, the counties identified as most food insecure by Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap report are in rural areas. We believe that we can achieve a farm bill that helps strengthen our agriculture economy, provides support to rural communities, and reduces hunger through partnership and collaboration, and look forward to engaging with you to achieve these shared goals.

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<sup>i</sup> Based on Feeding America analysis of USDA delivery order reports

<sup>ii</sup> USDA FY2016 Bonus Purchases, published 9/30/16

<sup>iii</sup> USDA, "Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 Food and Administrative Funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)," published 1/7/16

<sup>iv</sup> USDA, "The Emergency Food Assistance Program," published June 2016

<sup>v</sup> USDA, "The Emergency Food Assistance Program," published June 2016

<sup>vi</sup> Picchi, Aimee, "Most Americans can't handle a \$500 surprise bill," CBS news, 1/6/16

<sup>vii</sup> USDA, "WHITE PAPER ON THE EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (TEFAP) Final Report," Published August 2013

<sup>viii</sup> Weinfield, Nancy et al, "Hunger in America 2014," Feeding America, Published August 2016

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid