

The type of commodity distributed under the program is determined by current surplus products and generally consists of such items as dry beans, corn meal, flour, grits, shortening, rolled oats, peanut butter, split peas, rice and rolled wheat.⁶ Surplus commodities do not include fresh meat, fresh vegetables or fresh milk.⁶ The commodities are viewed by the Department of Agriculture as supplements to the recipient's food supply; however, as noted, many families rely on the commodities entirely.

Staff investigation revealed that although public assistance recipients are automatically eligible for the surplus food, not all such recipients are participating in the programs. During the period October 1966–September 1967, 26.2% of the public assistance recipients in Macon County and 24.5% of such recipients in Marengo County did not receive surplus food. In January 1963, 20% of the public assistance recipients in Butler County, and 23% of the public assistance recipients in Wilcox County received no surplus food.

Although no payment is necessary to obtain food under a surplus commodity program, distribution procedures deter many eligibles from participation. Testimony at the hearing indicated that most counties had only one food distribution point and transportation was necessary to get to the food. In addition, the volume of the food distributed—22 lbs. per household member—aggravated the transportation problem. The Commission also heard testimony by commodity recipients that many of the commodities “would be full of weevils and bugs and things. You couldn’t eat [them],” testified Mrs. Elizabeth Hutton.

The Food Stamp Program

The Food Stamp Act of 1964⁷ authorized the creation of a food stamp program in order to utilize the nation's abundance of food “to the maximum extent practicable to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's population and raise levels of nutrition among low-income households.” Under the Act, the Secretary of Agriculture is charged with formulating and administering a food stamp program that will provide needy households “an opportunity more nearly to obtain a nutritionally adequate diet” through the issuance to them of food stamps which have a greater monetary value than their normal expenditures for food. The stamps are then used to purchase food from retail food stores.

The Act provides that “In areas where a food stamp program is in effect, there shall be no distribution of federally owned foods to households . . . except during emergency situations caused by a national or other disaster as determined by the Secretary.”⁸

When a county shifts from a surplus food to a food stamp program, there is almost always a drastic drop in participation. Staff interviews with eligibles who were not participating in the stamp program revealed that the cost of stamps was the main reason for nonparticipation. When Dallas County shifted from surplus food to food stamps in the 1966–67 fiscal year, participation declined by more than 50 percent, from 11,493 to 5,237 individuals. In Greene County, where a similar change occurred in the same year, participation was almost halved, dropping from 6,666 to 3,685. Mr. Ruben King, the Commissioner of the State Department of Pensions and Security, testified that in most of the counties that have switched from commodities to food stamps, approximately one-third of the recipients drop out.

An even smaller proportion of public assistance recipients are participating in the food stamp program than participate in the surplus food program. During the period October 1966–September 1967, 87.3 percent of the public assistance recipients in Bullock County, 86.3 percent in Dallas County, 81.6 percent in Greene County and 75.5 percent in Hale County, did not participate in the food stamp program.

In January 1968, 64.7 percent of the public assistance recipients in Perry County were not participating in the food stamp program. Mrs. Augusta Wilkinson, the Director of the Dallas County Department of Pensions and Security

⁶ The types of food distributed under the program vary from month to month with the exception of flour, corn meal, corn grits, and bulgar, which have always been available for distribution monthly.

⁷ A Department of Agriculture survey indicates that from 26–30 percent of the diets of Southern rural people have less than two-thirds of the recommended dietary allowances. For persons in poverty in the same area, the percentages are 42–43 percent. Such diets, over sustained periods of time, are considered hazardous to health. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Dietary Levels of Households in the United States*, Spring 1965, ARS Report No. 62–17, January 1968.

⁸ 7 U.S.C. 2012 *et seq.*

⁹ 7 U.S.C. 2013 (b).