

# An Opportunity Lost?

*USDA Celebrates 40 Years Of Food Programs, But More Work Needed To Connect The Nation's Hungriest Consumers And Producers*

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USDA officials recently hosted an important event to celebrating the 40th anniversary of the department's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). As I scanned the 100-plus people assembled for the event in the Whitten Building's central patio, there were several dignitaries and representatives from the food and nutrition community. Noticeably missing were the folks who produce the food that underpins all of these great programs.

Why were so few representatives of the nation's primary farm and commodity groups at the invitation-only event? The folks at FNS say it was an abbreviated invite list and focused only on those groups they work with most often. But the fact that many agricultural groups weren't on the "A" list, underscores a continuing gap between those who need the food most and those who produce most of the food.

In case you are not familiar, FNS administers the nation's domestic nutrition assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP (formerly the Food Stamp Program); the National School Lunch Program, and 13 others. Their efforts touch one in five people across the U.S. with some type of feeding program.

Since 1969, when FNS was officially established the SNAP/Food Stamp Program has issued over \$554 billion in program benefits; NSLP has served over 169 billion meals; and \$27 billion in USDA commodities have been issued in food benefits for schools and another \$23 billion in food benefits for household and emergency feeding programs.

Farmers and FNS "customers" are linked in a variety of ways. Spending on these programs makes up about two-thirds of USDA's budget and utilizes billions of dollars in farm commodities. Congressional supporters of FNS are a crucial part of the political coalition that enables passage of major farm bills.

The hour-long ceremony, led by USDA's Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan, was everything you might expect from an anniversary cel-

ebration: a historical timeline, a progress report, and video to highlight the agency's accomplishments. Congresswoman Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO) and Congressman James P. McGovern (D-MA) presented Merrigan with a resolution honoring FNS for 40 years of fighting hunger and improving nutrition. It was heartening to learn about the millions who have benefited and USDA's plans to reach out to even more individuals who still go to bed hungry every night.

## **Farm to farm connection**

However, there was little recognition of the important connection between food production and food consumption in the FNS programs. The anniversary video started with one slide of a farm field, but the rest focused on how each of the programs worked and the types of consumers served. There was no discussion about how farm productivity has helped keep costs low so that millions of Americans can eat a safe, affordable food supply. And there was no mention of how plant breeding and biotechnology have played an important role in creating healthier foods.

In recorded remarks, Secretary Vilsack pointed out that President Obama is committed to reducing childhood hunger by 2015. To do that, the Secretary will need plenty of additional funds and lots of good thinkers on this subject. The folks at the FNS will certainly play a key role, but let's hope they reach out to those who represent farmers and ranchers as part of the process.

At the same time, traditional agriculture groups also need to look for innovative new ways to be engaged with the food and nutrition community. Groups such as the American Farm Bureau Federation have already done so by working with Feeding America (formerly America's Second Harvest) to donate millions of pounds of food. Working through their Young Farmers and Ranchers organization, Farm Bureau provided the equivalent of 6.4 million meals through Feeding America-affiliated food banks across the country last year.

There's an old bumper sticker that says: "If your child ate today, hug a farmer." More farm and commodity organizations need to figure out how that embrace can go both ways. Δ

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