

# Proposed Changes to Food Stamps. Who Wins? Who Loses?

by Linda Watson, author of *Wildly Affordable Organic*, a book on eating well on a food-stamp budget. for live links, visit [CookforGood.com/snap2019](http://CookforGood.com/snap2019)

Like a reverse Robin Hood, the 2019 US federal budget wants to take money off the SNAP cards of people in need and give them a box of packaged American-made commodity food instead. (You may know the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program as food stamps.) These USDA Foods Packages will take millions of our tax dollars away from the poor and give the money to corporations. It will make children weaker to make the wealthy richer. The collateral damage will create more food deserts, more bankrupt small businesses, and more environmental damage. Learn who the winners and losers will be if SNAP support shows up in a box, as proposed in the [Major Savings and Reforms section of the budget](#).

## Background

### What's the USDA Foods Package?

Households that get more than \$90 of SNAP benefits a month would get "a portion" of that benefit as a:

USDA Foods package, which would include items such as shelf-stable milk, ready to eat cereals, pasta, peanut butter, beans and canned fruit, vegetables, and meat, poultry or fish.

This change would affect about [81% of households on SNAP](#).

### What about the rest? What can you buy with SNAP?

The rest of the benefit would go on their EBT cards, the credit-card-like Electronic Benefits Transfer cards. Currently, SNAP lets people [buy food](#) at authorized stores. The EBT cards can also be used to buy seeds and plants to grow food. They can't be used for pet food, tobacco, alcohol, hot food, or food that will be eaten in the store.

### Why do this?

The budget claims that:

This cost-effective approach will generate significant savings to taxpayers with no loss in food benefits to participants. It will also improve the nutritional value of the benefit provided and reduce the potential for EBT fraud. States will have substantial flexibility in designing the food box delivery system through existing infrastructure, partnerships, or commercial/retail delivery services.

In fact, implementing this proposal will create a huge loss in benefits by adding costs and decreasing the value of the food delivered. The ripple effects will wash over everyone, on SNAP or not. This

proposal is a particularly brazen move in a [continuing government strategy](#) that shifts federal money and assets from the people to a select few so rich they can't spend more money.

## Who Wins? Who Loses?

- **Big Food companies win**, at least the ones that can sell huge quantities of cheap food and handle the technicalities of selling to the government. **Smaller, independent businesses and their customers lose**, including:
  - Grocery stores and markets that serve people on SNAP. Many stores in less affluent neighborhoods will go out of business, creating more food deserts. Those who stay in business may have to raise their prices, affecting all their customers.
  - Smaller food companies and any that don't get the big government contracts lose.
  - Local farmers and farmers' markets lose. In 2015, over \$19.4 million dollars in SNAP benefits were spent at [farmers' markets](#).
  - Makers of food using organic, GMO-free, or additive-free ingredients lose.
- **Big Dairy wins. People avoiding cows' milk lose:**
  - The 65% of people have [trouble digesting milk](#) after infancy lose, including about 90% of East Asians and many West African, Arab, Jewish, Greek, and Italian descent. For these people, drinking milk may lead to "abdominal pain, bloating, flatulence, nausea, and diarrhea beginning 30 minutes to 2 hours later." This misery disrupts school, work, and daily life.
  - People who are buying plant-milks or skipping white liquids altogether. [Milk sales fell by 17%](#) between 2010 and 2017.
  - The 5.5% of people who are [vegans](#) (up from 1% in 2014).
- **Cheap cereal and sugar companies win. Families who want healthy breakfasts lose.** Imagine getting a box of Chocolate Coated Sugar Bombs instead of being able to buy oatmeal or serve peanut butter on toast. People who can't or won't drink milk have additional problems with cereal if they are sent cows' milk instead of being able to buy plant milk.
- **Cheap pasta companies win. The 17% of people who [avoid gluten](#) lose**, including the 1% of people with [Celiac Disease](#) for whom eating gluten can lead to Type I diabetes, multiple sclerosis, and miscarriage. Whole-wheat organic pasta is a Cook for Good staple for those who can eat gluten, but that's not what you'll find in a US Foods Package.
- **Cheap peanut-butter companies win. The 0.6% of people who are [allergic to peanuts](#) lose.** Their families lose too, because even a whiff of peanuts can cause these people to have fatal and near-fatal allergic reactions. Actually, **everyone loses** because cheap peanut butter usually contains trans fats. Eating even small amounts of trans fats is [unsafe and even deadly](#).
- **Canned bean, fruit, and vegetable companies win. So do can makers and their suppliers. Families who want to eat fresh fruit and vegetables lose.**
  - People who receive food as a benefit that they can't or won't eat lose. Fresh fruit and vegetables taste much better than canned ones do. Greens, which we should eat every day, are particularly terrible when canned, no matter what Popeye says.
  - Families who want to avoid cans lined with [damaging BPA](#) lose.
  - Unless the food package contains dried beans, people who stretch their benefits by cooking dried beans lose.

- If the packages *do* contain dried beans, then people who can't cook food for a long time might as well get bags of pebbles. It's hard to cook dried beans if you are living in a rooming house or under a bridge.
- The planet loses as more raw material and energy is used to can food that could be eaten fresh.
- **Factory farmers and commercial fishers win. Businesses that sell fresh meat or fish lose. People who are allergic to or avoiding meat, poultry, and fish lose,** including:
  - Women who are pregnant or hope to be and children under 6, who should avoid eating tuna, mackerel, and other fish [high in mercury](#). Mercury is a dangerous neurotoxin that harms brain function and the developing nervous system.
  - The [3%](#) to [13%](#) of people who are vegetarians or vegans and the 37% of people who sometimes or always [choose vegetarian meals when eating out](#). (The polls for vegetarianism vary widely, based on how the poll questions are structured.)
  - People who don't eat certain meat for religious reasons, such as those who follow bans against pork or need kosher or halal food.
  - People who do eat meat, poultry, or fish, but only from sources that treat the animals and environment better than they are treated in [factory farms](#) or by [destructive fishing practices](#).
  - The planet loses again as more animals suffer and [more greenhouse gases](#) are produced.
- **Delivery services and box makers win. Families whose packages are lost, stolen, delayed, spoiled, or impossible to store lose.** Just shipping the boxes could eat up [20 to 30%](#) of the SNAP budget, maybe more in rural or isolated areas. I remember the time my sister's unruly son walked off with a bag of groceries she'd just brought home so he could share them with his friends. Imagine getting a big box with most of a month's worth of food in it if you are couch surfing or homeless. The planet loses again because of the trees needed to make the boxes and the fuel burned for all the at-home delivery.
- **Processed and packaged food companies win and gardeners, seed suppliers, and nurseries lose.** The best way to stretch SNAP benefits is to grow a garden. Planting a box of Fruit Loops is pointless.
- **No one wins and everyone loses** as children who are exposed to mercury from fish, BPA from canned foods, pesticides, and other toxins [develop with lower IQs](#), leading to a significant decrease in gifted people and increase in intellectually challenged people.

## Bottom Line

SNAP currently nourishes people in tight situations so many of them can support themselves. Half of new SNAP recipients [leave the program](#) after nine months when they are back on their feet. Levels of [misuse](#) are very low, with an error rate of less than 4% of funds and only 1% being exchanged for cash.

Allowing personal choice when spending the benefit allows families to adapt to their family's changing situations. It reduces crime, illness, and misery. It's an efficient way to help people in need. We must resist this transfer of tax money to our wealthiest citizens at the expense of our most vulnerable ones.

Let's work to reject the USDA Foods Package and to continue delivering SNAP benefits through EBT cards.