

1 *Tales at the Intersection of Want and Plenty*

There's a feeling that in a nation of abundance, where there is surplus food and, indeed, wasted food, that no one should go hungry.

—REP. BILL EMERSON, Republican from Missouri, 1990¹

Not Just a Box of Food

Our tale begins with The Box. Okay, to be precise, it begins with a February 2018 proposal by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) for an “America’s Harvest Box” of “100 percent U.S. grown and produced food” to be delivered each month to eligible “food-insecure” US households as part of benefits obtained from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—formerly known as food stamps.² In this plan, said to be the brainchild of Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, the USDA would purchase at bulk discount shelf-stable products such as peanut butter, pasta, and canned vegetables and ship a prescribed mix to enrolled households in some yet unspecified manner. The cost of what was in The Box would be deducted from SNAP enrollees’ monthly allotments, which otherwise come in the form of a dollar amount loaded onto an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) debit card. Not coincidentally,

the idea for the Harvest Box was floated at the same time that the Trump administration proposed a set of program rules designed to cut the roughly \$60 billion in annual SNAP spending by one-third over the next decade. White House Office of Management and Budget director Michael Mulvaney enthused about The Box: “What we do is propose that for folks who are on food stamps, part—not all, part—of their benefits come in the actual sort of, and I don’t want to steal somebody’s copyright, but a Blue Apron-type program where you actually receive the food instead of receive the cash. It lowers the cost to us because we can buy [at wholesale prices] whereas they have to buy it at retail. It also makes sure they’re getting nutritious food. So we’re pretty excited about that.”³

A side note: other than conflating a box of dried and canned goods with a pricy fresh-food meal-kit service like Blue Apron, Mulvaney was imprecise—perhaps intentionally so—insofar that SNAP households do not get “cash” in the strict sense. Instead, as noted, they get a specified dollar amount deposited each month into their EBT debit cards to be used to purchase food—and, despite urban legends, *only* food—at over 250,000 participating retailers. In this regard, SNAP benefits technically are “in-kind,” not cash.

Another side note: Mulvaney’s reference to “food stamps” rather than the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is telling. The federal government stopped using paper coupons after switching to debit cards two decades ago, and program advocates tend to avoid the term “food stamps” even as critics tend to stick to it. Both are aware of the political baggage of the old term, so their choice of labels is not incidental.

All right, one last side note: Mulvaney’s statement that a prescribed mix of foods offered in The Box will ensure that SNAP



FIGURE 1. Farmers to Families food boxes. Source: US Department of Agriculture, as contained in US Government Accountability Office, *USDA Food Box Program: Key Information and Opportunities to Better Assess Performance*, GAO-21-353, September 2021, www.gao.gov/assets/gao-21-353.pdf, 7.

households are “getting nutritious food” presupposes that current program enrollees don’t eat nutritionally adequate diets or that they have different diets than other Americans or that they simply don’t know enough to purchase and prepare “good” foods. We’ll unpack these assumptions later in this book.

In any case, Perdue’s Harvest Box idea was denounced by nutritionists, hunger relief organizations, and, tellingly, food retailers as impractical, expensive, nutritionally deficient, and misguided. Critics equated The Box with Great Depression-era breadlines in which the needy stood for handouts of surplus agricultural commodities purchased by the federal government and distributed as charity through local relief agencies. A typical response came from Jim Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center, a leading antihunger advocacy organization: “The president’s budget proposes to replace in significant part the very successful current system of having SNAP enrollees use EBT cards to

purchase food through grocery stores, supermarkets, farmers markets, and other normal commercial channels with a Rube-Goldberg designed system of commodity distribution via food boxes that will be administratively costly, inefficient, stigmatizing, and prone to failure, and that will return the country to Depression-era anti-hunger approaches.”⁴ (For any reader under the age of, say, sixty-five, a “Rube-Goldberg designed system,” named after a mid-twentieth-century US editorial cartoonist and inventor, is one that seeks to perform a seemingly straightforward task—in this instance getting food to those who need it—in the most convoluted and impractical manner possible. Weill’s depiction of *The Box* was intentional, but generationally anchored.)

At the same time, the Trump administration and most House Republicans were pushing an array of SNAP rules changes as Congress went through reauthorizing the Farm Bill, an omnibus (or “catch-all”) legislative vehicle within which most federal agricultural *and* nutrition programs are nested—for reasons we’ll get to soon enough.⁵ In particular, they sought to restrict flexibility in applying program “workfare” rules and to require most able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs, in bureaucrat-speak) to work at least twenty hours a week or be enrolled in state-authorized job-training programs to get any benefits. Proponents of the proposed rule argued that SNAP, or any social-welfare program for that matter, should not reduce incentives to work. Critics of the rule pointed out that many SNAP enrollees already worked but made too little money, lacked access to affordable day care, or lived in areas with few good employment opportunities and that the practical effect of inflexible work requirements would take food away from nearly a million needy people.⁶

A Land of (Too Much) Plenty

Meanwhile, the Trump administration was locked in disputes with major US trading partners, the effects of which were beginning to pinch the nation's export-dependent agricultural sector.⁷ Soybeans piled up all over the Midwest grain belt as China reacted to new US tariffs on their manufactured goods—taxes that raise the price of imports and whose costs ultimately are borne by consumers—by imposing tariffs on US agricultural commodities, particularly soy and corn used to feed animals. China also boosted soybean purchases from nations like Brazil, underscoring the interchangeability of such basic foodstuffs.⁸ Mexico, stung by Trump's abrupt decision to scuttle the 1992 North American Free Trade Agreement, already had slapped new tariffs on US pork. Similar retaliations came from India against US apples and out of the European Union, which targeted products from areas represented by top congressional Republicans—symbolically, Kentucky bourbon, from the home state of Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell.⁹ Taken together, these retaliatory actions hurt exports of US food products.

All the while, US farmers just kept on producing. Given the perverse logic of agricultural economics, most had little choice. A crop of Iowa corn planted in April *will* be harvested in October and eventually *will* be sold at whatever price can be obtained on global commodity markets, potentially at a loss, unless other ways can be found to use it up at a favorable price. To offer but one example, when the Energy Policy Act of 2005 mandated the blending of plant-based ethanol in gasoline, it was obvious that Congress meant as much to use up more corn and support corn growers as to

lessen the nation's dependence on imported petroleum—likely more.¹⁰ The dilemma is worse for perishable commodities like fruits, meat, dairy, and eggs, which, unless properly processed and stored, go bad rather quickly. Farmers need to keep producing to offset their sunk costs, if nothing else, so *someone* needs to buy all that food.

The combined results of largely unrestrained production and the effects of Trump's trade wars worsened already problematic surpluses on a range of commodities, from soy and pork to apples and milk—and even bourbon—that further depressed bulk prices, shrank producer revenues, and threatened to hurt a key part of Trump's electoral base. In response the administration sent to farmers some \$16 billion in “trade mitigation payments”—which critics called little more than outright handouts to already well-off producers. It also more than doubled spending, from \$758 million to \$1.95 billion, on The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), through which the USDA uses taxpayer dollars to purchase and distribute surplus agricultural commodities (except bourbon) to the nation's network of food banks, which in turn supply a vast array of food pantries and other agencies serving millions who need food.¹¹ (TEFAP, first authorized by Congress in 1983, once stood for the *Temporary* Emergency Food Assistance Program but is now essentially permanent. We'll talk more about that in chapter 5.)

All of this was *before* COVID-19 swept the country in March 2020 and closed tens of thousands of schools, hotels, restaurants, and businesses and with them long-established markets for agricultural commodities even as everyone rushed to their grocery stores to stock up for the unknown—only to find threadbare shelves. There *was* plenty of food around, but it wasn't always in the right

place. The pandemic's economic havoc also pushed millions into sudden food insecurity, even actual hunger. Families living paycheck to paycheck suddenly found themselves out of jobs and in their cars at pop-up food-distribution centers. The sharp surge in need soon led the federal government to ramp up spending on its various food-assistance programs, from SNAP to TEFAP to, yes, a "Farmers to Families" food box, the pandemic version of Sonny Perdue's Harvest Box containing food that might otherwise go to waste for the lack of a market.¹²

At the Intersection of Want and Plenty

Okay, you must be asking by now, *What do these tales have in common?*

Glad you asked. At one level they all relate to an agricultural production system often awash in soy, corn, dairy, and pork—even cranberries.¹³ Those in China, India, and Mexico who buy US agricultural commodities usually can get them elsewhere—Canadian cranberries, anyone?—and decisions they make to reduce imports from the United States means more unsold commodities at home. And, despite our renowned portion sizes and all-you-can-eat buffets, even we Americans can only eat so much. Unsold food, unlike unsold oil or steel, eventually goes to waste. Hence, The Box, and the boost in TEFAP distributions during the pandemic. Both were designed to use up unsold farm output and prop up commodity prices as much as to help Americans who needed food.

More precisely, these episodes individually and together speak to a tension that has marked US agricultural and food policies—they *are not the same*—for a century: how to minimize or reduce seemingly endless surpluses generated by immensely productive

US farmers, keep commodity prices high enough to allow those farmers to get a “fair” price for their goods without making food *too* expensive for consumers, and, finally, ensure that no American goes hungry. We need food to be affordable even for those with low incomes, but not so cheap that farmers cannot make a decent living. In short, and even with a robust export market, we need to figure out ways for every American to be able to buy as much food as possible, one way or another.

Out of these tensions emerged the nation’s largest, most expensive, least understood, most controversial and widely critiqued, and yet most consequential and resilient food-assistance program: food stamps, now the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. A coupon-based scheme first devised in the Great Depression to enable the needy to “purchase” surplus farm commodities and revived in the early 1960s as a way to leverage the private marketplace to address pockets of hunger and malnutrition has since evolved into the nation’s foundational food-assistance program, one that continues to be based on and defended within that nexus between abundance and need.¹⁴ Or, as it was put in the 1930s, to address the “paradox of want amidst plenty.”¹⁵

How did it get this way? And is this the best way to help those who need food? That’s why we’re here.

Tell Me a Story about Food Stamps

This book tells the story of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. In a larger sense it tells a story about the tension between how best to shield US farmers from price-depressing agricultural surpluses and how best to help Americans who need food, two conundrums typically, but not necessarily, linked together. Sonny