



USDA criticizing food stamp application methods

By: **Jerry Hagstrom**, Special to Agweek, March 8, 2010

WASHINGTON — Farmers, supermarkets and truckers across the country are losing billions of dollars in business because California, Texas, Arizona and New York City are using procedures that discourage people eligible for food stamps from applying for them, according to a key USDA official.

Agriculture Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services Kevin Concannon said in a recent interview that he thinks requiring food stamp applicants to have images taken of their finger before receiving benefits and procedural problems discourage low-income people from applying for the food stamp program — now formally titled the supplemental nutrition assistance program or SNAP.

The resulting lower-than-average participation rate in the three states and New York City limits hunger reduction and causes farmers, supermarkets and truckers to lose billions of dollars in federal benefits that could stimulate the economies of some of the biggest states, he says.

Concannon said USDA is investigating whether it has the authority to stop the states from using finger imaging.

“We may have the authority” to stop finger imaging, Concannon said. “That is why I am proceeding to have that reviewed. If we do have it, I want to make sure it is a sustainable decision. We will look at the history of the program.”

Members of Congress and some officials in the affected states and New York City have urged Concannon to try to stop the practice. House Agriculture Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry Subcommittee Chairman Joe Baca, D-Calif., held a hearing Jan. 25 in Colton, Calif., at which he said California is losing \$3.7 billion per year in federal benefits and \$6.9 billion in economic activity because of finger imaging and other application problems.

In 2007, the last year for which there is official statistics, only 51 percent of Californians who are eligible for food stamps received them. The national average was about 66 percent.

Concannon may have the authority to stop finger imaging because the states only began using it after USDA in previous administrations agreed it was a way to make sure the

people who get the benefits are the same as the ones who applied and were approved for them.

At a Jan. 21 ceremony to turn over artifacts from the old food stamp program to the Smithsonian, Concanon said he thinks the electronic benefit cards that have replaced physical coupons have ended the need for finger imaging if it ever existed.

“I have made it very clear that if any state came forward today, I would not approve it,” he added.

Discrimination?

Joel Berg of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger and other advocates have told Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Concanon that they have the authority to stop finger imaging because it is used disproportionately against minorities and is a waste of food stamp administration money.

“Given that states with the whitest populations (North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Montana and West Virginia) do not require finger images, while the four states that do require finger images have proportions of African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asians far higher than the national average, it is clear that finger imaging has an unfair negative impact upon nonwhite Americans,” Berg wrote to Vilsack Aug. 12.

Berg added, “I note that USDA does not require finger images from farmers, ranchers and rural business people, who are overwhelmingly white and male, but does allow four states to require finger images for SNAP, which has a caseload that is disproportionately nonwhite and female. Such disparate treatment also violates the equal protection clause.”

Officials in the affected states and New York City still defend finger imaging.

New York City Mayor Human Resources Administration Commissioner Robert Doar, appointee of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, said in an interview, “We need finger imaging because in welfare programs, there is a potential for abuse and waste.”

Doar noted that USDA has praised New York City for other steps it has taken to ease application procedures. Concanon acknowledged that New York City officials have made improvements, but added, “I can’t give them a free pass on finger imaging.”

Concanon also noted that Texas and Indiana’s low participation rates are a result of failed experiments in privatization of the food stamp application process.