

Minority Views on Committee Print, as reported by the Committee on Agriculture, required by S. Con. Res. 5

Summary

S. Con. Res. 5 provides reconciliation instructions to certain Committees of the House. For its part, the Agriculture Committee is responsible for producing legislation that achieves \$16.112 billion in new spending. The Committee Print to accompany this legislation is a partisan exercise, developed behind closed doors with zero input from the Minority, and the measure fails to meet the needs of rural America while exploding the deficit to fund programs including those just funded two months ago, programs with a tenuous connection to the pandemic, and priorities that manage to ignore most farmers and ranchers.

This partisan approach is particularly galling in the context of the Agriculture Committee, which has long prided itself on being the most bipartisan Committee in the House. In addition, the Agriculture Committee has never before been utilized in a reconciliation process for the sole purpose of increasing deficit spending without any provisions to create mandatory savings. All told, this exercise will saddle future generations with \$1.9 trillion in additional debt while more than \$1 trillion in already enacted coronavirus relief funds remain unspent.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has only obligated 62 percent of the monies provided by Congress to date.

In order to highlight just a few of the priorities missing from the bill, Republican Leader Glenn “GT” Thompson (R-PA) offered an amendment that would have redirected 23 percent of spending under the bill - holding harmless provisions for socially disadvantaged producers and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits - to support critical needs for rural families, businesses, and communities. The amendment would have provided critical investments in biofuels, needed assistance for rural communities through distance learning and telemedicine grants, broadband infrastructure improvements, and aid for rural hospitals, community facilities, rural utility providers, and rural businesses.

During the markup, the Majority universally praised the proposals offered in the amendment and professed that they shared the same priorities yet labeled them as “poison pills” that would derail the entire process. The amendment failed 24-23 along partisan lines.

Additionally, an amendment offered by Representative Jim Baird (R-IN) was rejected on a party line vote. The amendment would have required the Biden Administration to unfreeze funding for the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) – for which signup has already begun – prior to moving forward with additional spending under this bill. If the impact of the COVID-19 crisis is so acute it necessitates moving additional aid through Congress in this hurried partisan manner, it would make eminent sense not to hold up critical assistance ready to be delivered in a matter of days, rather than delaying help for weeks or months on an arbitrary review process.

Subtitle A

Sec. 1001 – Food Supply Chain and Agriculture Pandemic Response

Section 1001 provides \$3.6 billion in funding for the Secretary to purchase food and agricultural commodities, distribute commodities to individuals in need, make grants and loans to processors and distributors for measures to protect workers against COVID-19, and provide assistance available to improve agricultural supply chain resiliency. While all important provisions, the Minority would note that these are all authorities that were provided to the Secretary in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (PL 116-260) along with \$11 billion in funding that has yet to be obligated by USDA. Additionally, the original text of the legislation completely ignored the needs of production agriculture and did not contain any provision that would provide direct support to producers.

An amendment offered by Representative Randy Feenstra (R-IA), which makes disaster relief for 2020 losses (including losses by high winds or derechos) eligible for funding under the section, was adopted by a 24-23 margin with one Democrat joining all members of the Minority in supporting. All other amendments offered by the Minority were defeated along partisan lines, including an amendment offered by Representative Jim Hagedorn (R-MN) to require that 80 percent of previous funding made available to USDA for COVID-19 relief be expended before any new funds under the bill could be obligated.

Additionally, this section makes \$300 million available to the Secretary to carry out monitoring and surveillance of susceptible animals for incidence of SARS-CoV-2 despite USDA and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidance advising against such testing.

Sec. 1002 – Emergency Grants for Rural Health Care

Section 1002 provides \$500 million in funding for the Secretary to make grants to entities eligible for the Community Facilities Program in order to assist eligible entities in meeting the healthcare needs of rural residents.

Almost one year and \$3.5 trillion into this pandemic, the Majority's belated recognition of the needs of rural health providers and the unique challenges that they face is welcome. Yet, this program is poorly targeted, badly designed, and insufficient for the crisis facing rural hospitals and other essential service providers in rural communities.

The Majority's legislation excludes hospitals and health facilities which are ineligible for the Community Facilities program. In many communities this blanket prohibition excludes the sole hospital or healthcare provider. We do not believe that essential assistance to battle the pandemic should be limited to health providers who meet the limited requirements of the Community Facilities program.

Similarly, the Majority's further restrictions on the usage of grant funds, the complex limitations on median household income, and wage mandates, all further conspire to make this program needlessly complicated and treat similar situated communities unequally.

Finally, the \$500 million in funds is woefully insufficient for the scope of this crisis. Last Congress, Subcommittee Ranking Member Austin Scott (R-GA) offered a more robust proposal which would have addressed the concerns the Minority raised with the Majority and provided \$4 billion in funding.

Ranking Member Glenn “GT” Thompson’s (R-PA) amendment included a program which was modeled on Subcommittee Ranking Member Austin Scott’s (R-GA) legislation. It would have provided a more flexible, responsive program for USDA to meet the needs of rural hospitals, educational institutions, and public safety facilities. Unfortunately, it was rejected out of hand by the Majority.

In doing so, the Majority suggested the amendment would cost lives and hinder vaccine deployment, while failing to note that under Republican Leader Glenn “GT” Thompson’s amendment, \$150 million more would have been made available for rural healthcare needs.

Sec. 1005 – Farm Loan Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Assistance and Sec. 1006 – Assistance and Support for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers, Ranchers, Forest Land Owners and Operators, and Groups

The Minority believes that issues of social justice and addressing historical racial inequities in USDA programs is a worthy and important endeavor for the Committee. These issues certainly deserve thorough review, thoughtful analysis, and a deliberative process to determine the best policy solutions to address the problems faced by socially disadvantaged farmers. The Chairman of the Committee highlighted his intentions to hold a hearing on the matter. However, the Minority believes it is prudent to hold such a hearing prior to enacting unvetted legislation that could have unintended impacts, including for the very producers who are the intended beneficiaries.

The Majority was unable to answer simple questions such as those regarding what specific producers would be eligible under these sections, if women would be eligible for these programs, or even if there was a nexus between the purpose of the program and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Majority’s inability to articulate responses makes it clear that if these provisions are to have coherent purpose, further discussions of these provisions are necessary before they become law.

Subtitle B

Section 1011. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Section 1011 both extends a 15 percent increase to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits from June 30, 2021 to September 30, 2021 and provides \$1.15 billion to States for administrative-related expenses.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program currently provides nutrition assistance to 43 million individuals, providing an average benefit of \$183 per person, up from \$122 in October 2019, the last full fiscal year of data made available. Total SNAP-related spending in FY 2020 was \$78.9 billion, which includes benefits, administration, nutrition education, employment and training, and program integrity. Total benefits provided to households in FY 2020 totaled \$74.2 billion.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted households in need in unprecedented ways, and the Congressional response to hunger remains colossal. By way of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), and

the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, more than \$37.8 billion has been appropriated to respond to the nutrition needs of our nation's vulnerable. This magnificent response is also in addition to the more than \$7.7 billion per month in standard SNAP benefits. Beyond direct funding from Congress, over 3,000 administrative waivers have been provided to all States; these waivers impact operations related to program eligibility, distribution of benefits, employment and training, etc.

Like other Committees, this Committee has found itself victim to an Administration and a Majority who have repeatedly failed to take into consideration the plight of the American worker, the worker who has fallen victim to shuttered businesses, job-killing shutdowns, and canceled classes and training.

Rather than perpetuate our Nation's second largest expansion of welfare entitlements, and continue down a pathway of never-ending work disincentives and prolonged dependency, Representative Kat Cammack (FL-03) introduced a commonsense amendment that would have taken \$3 billion from an extension of an (arbitrary) benefit increase and injected it directly into SNAP Employment and Training (E&T). These funds would have provided a lifeline to individuals staring at a post-pandemic economy unlike one ever seen.

Instead of entertaining the amendment, the Majority immediately launched into a tirade against it, also calling into question Republicans' commitment to the Congressional response to hunger. Unfortunately, a few facts were left out of this response, including the fact that the SNAP benefit formula assumes households will spend at least 30 percent of their net income on food; SNAP makes up the difference between that contribution and the cost of the Thirty Food Plan. To claim that SNAP is the only means of purchasing food is disingenuous at best. The Majority relies on a half-truth – that anyone on SNAP who can work, does – which begs the question, which is it? Is SNAP the only means to food access, or do working households spend some amount of money on food? Worse, the Majority acknowledged that “many people lost their jobs because of the pandemic.” The ensuing rant against using the benefit increase, not the benefit itself, for employment and training further proved the Majority has no interest in helping the very unemployed workers they rely on for political messaging to regain employment, an income, and independence, particularly as this pandemic begins to recede.

Additionally, the Majority continues to rely on (anecdotal) evidence related to the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. The Majority fails to acknowledge that this program has open eligibility, making certain anyone and everyone in need, regardless of status, income, household size, has access to nutritious foods that run the gamut from fruits and vegetables to meat and dairy. This program has provided over 136 million boxes to households across the nation. And with this program, farmers were able to redirect their products, American workers were able to sustain their employment or join new ventures, and most importantly, a vast selection of foods that would have otherwise been wasted found their way into the homes of millions.

Section 1012. Additional Assistance for SNAP Online Purchasing and Technology Improvements

This section provides an additional \$25 million, to remain available until September 30, 2026, to make technological improvements to improve SNAP online purchasing, to modernize electronic benefit transfer (EBT) technology, to support mobile technologies demonstration projects, and for technical assistance purposes. This appropriation is in addition to the \$5 million provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, of which it is unknown what has been obligated as of February 12, 2021.

Section 1013. Additional Funding for Nutrition Assistance Programs

Section 1013 provided an additional \$1 billion to remain available until September 30, 2027, for nutrition assistance grants to be provided to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa, of which \$30 million is guaranteed for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. This appropriation is in addition to the \$614 million provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, of which to date, zero has been obligated. This calls into question the need, and the desire of the Majority to circumvent the annual appropriations process without a clear understanding of the needs of these communities.

Section 1014. Commodity Supplemental Food Program

This section appropriates \$37 million to the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, a program geared toward seniors in need. It is important to note that the Speaker of the House was the sole arbiter of every policy related to nutrition since the beginning of the pandemic, and yet never once acknowledged the needs of our Nation's seniors. Until the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, where the Minority reflected on the need based on data from USDA, the Majority had no proposal to fund this important program. Instead, the Majority has spent eleven months advocating for various legislative proposals aimed at pausing program integrity measures, allowing SNAP benefits to be used for diapers and sundries, expanding SNAP to be accepted in restaurants, and earmarking millions of dollars to further bloat multi-billion dollar nonprofits.

Grants for Distance Learning and Telemedicine Needs

Perhaps there is no more urgent need than additional funds for the Distance Learning and Telemedicine (DLT) program, which helps hospitals, health clinics, schools, and libraries purchase the equipment needed to help rural residents see doctors and teachers safely during this pandemic.

USDA has indicated that this program is dramatically oversubscribed, with over \$200 million worth of application requests that have sat unfulfilled since the pandemic began. Republican Leader Glenn "GT" Thompson's (R-PA) amendment would have addressed this backlog by providing an immediate infusion of \$200 million into the DLT program. Unfortunately, it was unanimously rejected by the Majority on the grounds that providing funds for broadband programs would "derail the bill."

Distance learning and telemedicine tools require broadband access and this pandemic has laid bare the stark divide between those with broadband access and those without broadband access. The Minority agrees with the concerns of the Majority, that construction of broadband infrastructure is a long-term investment and will not be solved overnight. However, the Minority

strongly believes that this amendment is the right way to continue to make investments in those programs.

Assistance for Rural Families and Essential Rural Utility Providers

Many families have been forced to make difficult financial choices over the past year and at times, that has understandably included skipping utility bills. Rural utility operators – like electric cooperatives, local telephone companies, municipal water systems, and waste disposal services – are facing crippling drops in revenue from bills their subscribers cannot pay and lost demand due to idled businesses. These costs have been mounting month after month for rural utility operators, who nevertheless continue to provide their essential services to the families and communities who rely on them.

Unlike large, diversified utility companies, many utility companies serving isolated rural communities are small, independent, and lack access to the capital markets and financial services that might enable them to better withstand these temporary disruptions.

The Minority does not believe that this situation is sustainable, which is why Republican Leader Glenn “GT” Thompson’s (R-PA) amendment included an important provision - based on legislation introduced by Representative Rick Crawford (R-AR) - to provide bridge loans to rural utility operators to see them through this time of disruption, and provide them with the necessary breathing room until economic conditions return to normal. The legislation would encourage operators to work with their customers to provide flexible repayment options, extended repayment periods, and even debt forgiveness for those who are in need.

Assistance for Rural Businesses

The Minority notes with concern the lack of parity between the treatment of business lending programs at the Small Business Administration (SBA) and the Rural Business Service (BRS) of USDA. In the CARES Act and again in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, borrowers in loan programs operated by SBA were provided with significant temporary assistance with their loan and interest payments. No such similar assistance was extended to borrowers in similar loan programs operated by RBS. Bipartisan legislation was introduced by Representatives Cynthia Axne (D-IA) and Troy Balderson (R-OH) which would have addressed this inequity.

The Minority strongly believes this is an oversight in need of correction, which is why the amendment included a provision which would have rectified this oversight.

In Closing

As we have detailed in these views, we believe the Majority’s proposal fails to fully address the myriad of problems facing rural communities. It doubles down on assistance where it is unnecessary while ignoring proposals that would alleviate tangible, immediate problems.

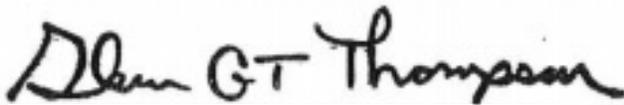
Perhaps more concerning was the Majority’s continued and inexplicable insistence that any alterations to the plan - devised in secret by their Leadership - would result in delays to the passage of this relief bill. We are incredulous at such claims and would not find them worthy of

discussion, if they were not the sole reason the Majority could offer for their indestructible blockade of common sense.

There is no plausible or rational argument that can be made that adopting an amendment during a markup delays the legislative process. Perhaps the Majority was simply seeking to save time for the Leadership staff, who would have had to find and delete any text added during markup, so as to preserve their legislation, in its perfect inception. If that is the concern, it makes one wonder why we bothered with this charade to begin with.

Yet, we need not stretch for hypotheticals in this argument. The Majority surprised itself by adopting Representative Randy Feenstra's (R-IA) amendment. We shall see if its inclusion delays or derails the Budget and Rules Committees as they prepare this Reconciliation Package. The Minority suspects that it will not, whether the Majority keeps the provision or takes the time to carefully strike it from the text.

To say that members of the Minority were frustrated with this process would be an understatement. We take the Chairman at his word that this process will not be the process we undertake in future Committee business. We look forward to the many opportunities for hearings and oversight and fruitful participation in the work of this Committee in the months to come.



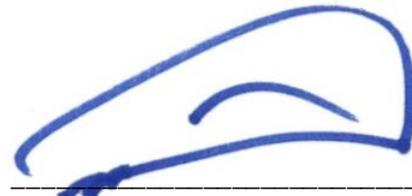
Representative Glenn 'GT' Thompson (PA-15)
Republican Leader
House Committee on Agriculture



Representative Austin Scott (GA-08)



Representative Rick Crawford (AR-01)



Representative Scott DesJarlais, M.D. (TN-04)



Representative Vicky Hartzler (MO-04)



Representative Doug LaMalfa (CA-01)



Representative Rodney Davis (IL-13)



Representative Rick W. Allen (GA-12)



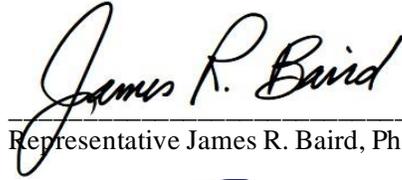
Representative David Rouzer (NC-07)



Representative Don Bacon (NE-02)



Representative Dusty Johnson (SD-AL)



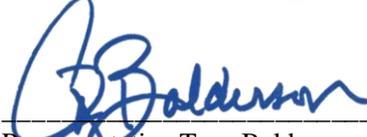
Representative James R. Baird, Ph.D. (IN-04)



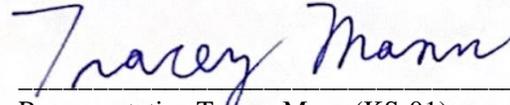
Representative Jim Hagedorn (MN-01)



Representative Chris Jacobs (NY-27)



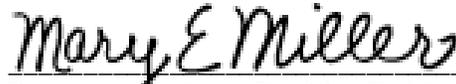
Representative Troy Balderson (OH-12)



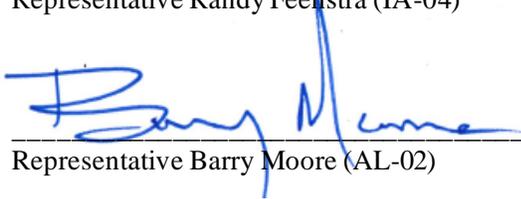
Representative Tracey Mann (KS-01)



Representative Randy Feenstra (IA-04)



Representative Mary E. Miller (IL-15)



Representative Barry Moore (AL-02)



Representative Kat Cammack (FL-03)



Representative Michelle Fischbach (MN-07)