

One cheer for a less-bad farm bill

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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It looks like Washington is about to do what recently seemed a far-off dream: [actually enact a farm bill](#). From a farm-reform perspective, the bill that the House passed and the Senate is now debating is uninspiring, but it could be worse. The same goes for nutrition assistance: the bill doesn't drastically cut SNAP (food stamps) eligibility and benefits as House Republicans sought to do, but it does cut benefits by more than 1 percent over the next decade.

Bob Greenstein, a longtime defender of the social safety net, [thinks this is a pretty decent deal for hungry people](#), since the cuts a) are much smaller than Republicans would have liked and b) affect just benefits, not eligibility. Also this:

The SNAP cut that remains is a provision to tighten an element of the SNAP benefit calculation that some states have converted into what most people would view as a loophole. Specifically, some states are stretching the benefit formula in a way that enables them not only to simplify paperwork for many SNAP households, but also to boost SNAP benefits for some SNAP households by assuming those households pay several hundred dollars a month in utility costs that they do *not* actually incur. Congress did not intend for states to stretch the benefit rules this way, and longstanding SNAP supporters like myself find it difficult to defend.

Of course, calling it a “loophole”—as many news reports do as well—makes it easy to infer that this is about just-shy-of-fraudulent behavior by (or on behalf of) the so-called hungry. Actually it's about a convoluted approach to a worthwhile end—hardly unprecedented in our system of government. It's easy to sell this as simply closing a hole in the law. Great job everyone, now our law leaks less! But it wasn't leaking waste or fraud; it was leaking bona fide assistance to hungry people.

Plug that hole, and program critics will have less to roll their eyes at. As for the 850,000 families the cuts will affect, they'll just have less *food*.

And it's crucial to keep in mind that the nation's food banks and pantries aren't exactly welcoming this opportunity to shift more of the hunger burden to the private sector. They're [scrambling to adjust to the benefit cuts](#)—there was [another one just a couple months ago](#)—because **public and private anti-hunger efforts tend to exist in partnership, not in competition.**

I think [David Beckmann's response to the bill](#) takes the right tone: the lack of more draconian food stamps cuts “are a huge victory for people who are hungry.” Yet these people are stuck playing all defense, because “**any cut to SNAP is harmful.**”

Yet cut them we will, because feeding the hungry among us just doesn't seem to be a top priority. Yes, the government is divided, and yes, [this bill represents real compromise](#). But it's hard to muster much enthusiasm for a compromise that sticks it to poor people as usual, though only a little this time.