

Aid groups feel the pinch of rising food and gas prices: Higher demand, lower supply

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Dramatic increases in food and gas prices are leaving some religious hunger-relief groups praying for relief.

Problems were already apparent in 2006, but U.S. churches now report increased difficulty getting meals to people who need them. Food distributors see a perfect storm: a huge jump in requests from new clients, along with decreased donations and a thinning food supply.

Antihunger activists are experiencing severe challenges in at least two areas—a new farm bill they say is inadequate to meet current needs, and a drop in food supplies for local food pantries and soup kitchens.

The nearly \$300 billion farm bill that cleared Congress in mid-May by veto-proof margins (318 to 106 in the House and 81 to 15 in the Senate) was deemed only “half a loaf” by David Beckmann, president of the ecumenical antihunger group Bread for the World.

The farm bill saw heavy lobbying by Catholic Charities, the Episcopal Public Policy Network, the Lutheran Office of Governmental Affairs and other groups. While cheering the legislation’s increase in allocations for food stamps and food banks, advocates said the amount fell short.

“It [was] inadequate even before the economic crisis hit, and certainly inadequate at this point,” said Candy Hill, a policy expert at Catholic Charities. Still, she said, “it’s progress that they didn’t slash it in half.”

Catholic Charities heads a network of more than 1,700 agencies nationwide, which report difficulties at all levels. At the top, groups like America’s Second Harvest, which provides food to 75 percent of the nation’s soup kitchens and food pantries,

said the U.S. Department of Agriculture has cut its donations of staples like milk, meat and fresh fruits and vegetables by 10 percent over the last five years.

“That’s 200 million pounds of food, gone,” said Ross Fraser, spokesperson at Second Harvest.

Food prices have gone up for a variety of reasons, including rising fuel costs, the diversion of corn to ethanol production, and the related rise in commodities prices worldwide. This year, food prices are projected to increase at least 4 to 5 percent.

A sluggish economy impacts donations almost as much as the calendar— food donations are usually high during Thanksgiving and Christmas, but not in the summer.

“This is not a time when most people consider making food contributions,” said Jane Stenson, Catholic Charities’ director for human services. When soup kitchens and pantries see donations slip, they seek more help from businesses and congregations. “But we can’t go back to the well too many times,” Stenson said.

Hunger-relief activists said that while donations are dropping, more and more people are looking for meals. Workers at Second Harvest agree: 99 percent of the hunger-relief agencies they surveyed reported that demand is up from last year.

Suzanne Edwards, chief operating officer of Catholic Charities in Jacksonville, Florida, said there has been nearly a 50 percent increase in requests last month alone.

She sees many more working poor and middle-class people come in for meals, often for the first time. “A lot of [food pantries] are reporting new families,” Stenson said. “They come in and they are not sure what to ask for.” Another new sight: parents taking their kids for free meals during spring break.

With a low hourly wage and more of their income going for gas and other expenses, “they are using the food bank to stay afloat,” Stenson said.

In Washington, the Foggy Bottom Food Pantry at the United Church, located just blocks from the White House, has seen less and less food donated from manufacturers or grocery stores.

Staffer George Madill said when Foggy Bottom runs out of supplies, volunteers grab their checkbooks and go shopping to fill the gap. He has to buy products at retail or

close to retail prices, which “has increased our costs dramatically.” Food banks and pantries spend an estimated \$130 million a year buying food.

Despite the setbacks, hunger-relief advocates said they remain determined to demand change in the way the government feeds the hungry. After all, a spokesperson from Catholic Charities said, “Poor people don’t have lobbyists, they have us.” *-Religion News Service*