

Exclusionary SNAP Policies Ignore Rural Food Access Realities and Increase Costs for Retailers

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March 2025

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides vital food assistance to more than 147,000 households throughout West Virginia, with research showing it improves health and boosts household economic security. People participating in SNAP spend about 25 percent less on health care annually than similar non-participating adults, report better health, and are less likely to stay home sick or need medical attention, even as they are less likely to forego needed care because of the cost.¹

SNAP benefits are 100 percent federally funded. Each year, SNAP lifts 51,000 West Virginians above the poverty line, including 18,000 children, all while providing vital food assistance to a wide array of households including senior citizens, low-income workers, and residents with disabilities.²

While SNAP dollars are modest for households (less than \$6 per person per day on average) these dollars are vital for retailers, grocers, and our state's broader economy. In 2024, SNAP brought over \$500 million in federal food benefits into the state, benefiting more than 2,200 authorized West Virginia SNAP retailers. SNAP plays an important role in the food economy, particularly during economic downturns. As more households become eligible for SNAP when the economy weakens, SNAP spending increases (while other spending is often declining) which, in turn, stimulates the economy. In a weak economy, SNAP generates \$1.54 in economic activity for every \$1 spent on the program.³

State proposals to limit foods that can be purchased with SNAP dollars, like that in HB 2350, could face significant challenges receiving federal approval and cost West Virginia retailers vital federal food dollars, all while failing to address underlying goals of improving nutrition among households.

Federal Hurdles

The current structure of SNAP in West Virginia follows principles of free market economics. According to federal law, to "...to alleviate hunger and malnutrition, SNAP permits low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet **through normal channels of trade** by increasing food purchasing power for all eligible households who apply...". It also defines eligible foods as "any food or food product intended for human consumption".⁴

While states have requested waivers in the past to ban certain "unhealthy" foods from SNAP, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has never approved a state waiver to establish or enforce such restrictions, including during the first Trump administration.⁵ In previous denials, USDA has cited a wide range of implementation concerns and found "serious problems with the rationale, feasibility, and potential

¹ Steven Carlson and Brynne Keith-Jennings, "SNAP Is Linked With Improved Nutritional Outcomes and Lower Health Care Costs", *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, January 2018.

² Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "West Virginia SNAP Fact Sheet", January 21, 2025.

³ United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, "SNAP-Key Statistics and Research", Updated January 6, 2025.

⁴ 7 CFR 271.1 and 7 CFR 271.2

⁵ USDA letter dated April 11, 2017, to Mary C. Mayhew, Commissioner of Maine Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved at <https://www.foodpolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/USDA-letter-to-Maine-SNAP-Waiver-17.pdf>.

effectiveness” of proposals to restrict types of food that can be purchased via SNAP dollars.⁶ Because of these free market and implementation concerns, approval of a waiver will be a challenge and, as such, requiring the Department of Human Services to submit and resubmit this waiver until one is granted, as HB 2350 directs, is a time-consuming exercise in futility.

SNAP Restrictions Unworkable for Retailers

SNAP provided over \$500 million in revenue for 2,200 SNAP approved grocers and retailers in West Virginia in 2024.⁷ Restricting SNAP purchases puts an undue burden on the many small businesses that accept SNAP in West Virginia to constantly update their systems to ensure clerks and SNAP participants comply with new purchase restrictions. Even for retailers that have the necessary technology, reprogramming computer systems adds a burdensome layer of complexity to accepting SNAP. This would create an ongoing cost for retailers to code new items as they come on the market, as more than 20,000 new products are introduced each year.

SNAP restrictions could also have major consequences for households and retailers near the West Virginia border. While families who depend on SNAP must apply for benefits within their state of residence, all SNAP recipients are free to engage in interstate commerce with their federal food assistance dollars. It is unclear if neighboring states’ retailers would be required to comply with West Virginia SNAP purchase restrictions.

In border communities, limiting the purchases that can be made with SNAP dollars at West Virginia retailers could lead to significant federal dollars leaving the state for retailers just across the border if neighboring states do not impose such restrictions on their retailers, leaving West Virginia retailers with less business. In just a single month, SNAP transactions in West Virginia border counties totaled over \$25 million (Figure 1).

Figure 1: West Virginia SNAP Benefits in Border Counties, May 2024

County	SNAP Benefits May 2024		
Berkeley	\$2,749,406	Mineral	\$506,151
Brooke/Hancock	\$1,015,757	Mingo	\$1,253,845
Cabell	\$2,766,400	Monongalia	\$1,423,358
Grant	\$228,502	Monroe	\$261,113
Greenbrier	\$812,824	Morgan	\$323,476
Hampshire	\$563,567	Ohio	\$1,172,660
Hardy	\$264,453	Pendleton	\$120,247
Jackson	\$765,614	Pleasants	\$162,035
Jefferson	\$862,091	Pocahontas	\$162,712
Marshall	\$692,872	Preston	\$787,137
Mason	\$1,217,689	Tyler	\$197,948
McDowell	\$865,607	Wayne	\$1,230,163
Mercer	\$1,978,431	Wetzel	\$480,379
		Wood	\$2,266,849
		Total	\$25,131,286

Source: WV FOODLINK via data from West Virginia Department of Human Services

⁶ USDA Food and Nutrition Service, “Implications of Restricting the Use of Food Stamp Benefits- Summary”. Retrieved from <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/FSPFoodRestrictions.pdf>.

⁷ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “West Virginia SNAP Fact Sheet”, January 21, 2025.

SNAP Purchase Restrictions Do Not Address Underlying Barriers to Nutrition

The lack of accessible, affordable healthy food is not an individual issue, but a broader economic and societal one. Many rural areas lack the population base large enough to support a grocery store that stocks a variety of affordable and healthy foods. As a result, dollar stores have rapidly expanded in rural areas, which tend to offer foods higher in calories and lower in nutrients, with few fresh, healthy foods available. Dollar stores play an increasingly prominent role in food purchases for rural communities with 6 percent of all food spending among rural households coming from dollar stores.⁸

Even when healthy foods are available, they can be much more costly and time-intensive to purchase and prepare. For low-income, rural households, calorically dense and ‘cheap’ or easily accessible food can sometimes be what is available or affordable.

Limiting what SNAP recipients can buy does nothing to address the broader issues of food deserts or the high cost of healthy foods, it simply punishes households for issues largely outside their control.

Instead of SNAP food restrictions, state and federal lawmakers should increase SNAP benefit levels and offer incentives to ensure households can afford more healthful options. Investing in programs like SNAP Stretch, which double SNAP benefits when they are used to purchase fruits and vegetables at participating farmers’ markets and grocers, is a much more effective path that can increase nutrition without punishing families.

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⁸ Feng Wenhui, et al. “Dollar Stores and Food Access for Rural Households in the United States, 2008-2020”, American Journal of Public Health, March 2023.