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Stormy times for those who need food banks' help

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MANY antihunger programs around the nation are facing a "perfect storm." Food for distribution to hungry families is at historic lows. At the same time, the cost of food is rising at an alarming pace - which means more and more families need our help, particularly during the economic downturn. As food becomes more expensive, hunger is rising. It is up to policymakers to take steps to ease food price inflation.

Today, congressional policies require the United States to produce 9 billion gallons of corn-based ethanol this year. This is one policy that needs review. In order to meet that "food-to-fuel" mandate, we will have to divert about one-third of all the corn grown in this nation for ethanol. That policy has sent the price of corn skyward over the past year. While most hunger advocates support alternative energy sources we are concerned when food is the source versus other alternative sources like wind, sun, etc.

The impact of more expensive corn is not limited to corn products. Corn is also the primary ingredient in animal feed. So as corn gets more expensive, the price of eggs, poultry, milk, and meat also rise. Moreover, with corn fetching top dollar, farmers naturally plant less of everything else, so grain prices rise across the board.

In the meantime, the number of hungry Americans grows and our ability to feed them dramatically diminishes.

The most urgent need is for increased generosity. All Americans are feeling the pressure. And in order to live through this "perfect storm" Americans will need to respond as they always have: with an outpouring of giving. Similarly, federal, state, and local government agencies must take appropriate steps to make sure that aid is getting to those who need it most as quickly as possible.

But ultimately, we need to treat the disease and not just the symptoms. Food inflation is currently running at twice the rate of overall inflation - the fastest rise in over two decades. As one who has spent my career working to feed the hungry, I can testify that sustained food inflation at this pace will devastate millions of families. For the working poor who live from paycheck to paycheck, rising grocery prices can mean losing the ability to pay for rent; losing the ability to pay for medicine; losing the ability to save and avoid the pitfall of predatory lending.

Given these threats to hard-working Americans, one significant opportunity at this juncture would be to revisit energy policies that may be contributing to this problem. This

conclusion is only strengthened by the fact that last year, corn ethanol displaced barely 3 percent of gasoline consumption. Recent studies also suggest that the environmental impact of corn ethanol is neutral or even negative.

At a time of record food inflation, our elected leaders need to be focused on doing what is necessary to feed America. Determining appropriate amendments to an energy policy that is failing to meet the needs of our nation is an obvious first step.

American farmers are the best and most efficient in the world. We are a nation blessed with food abundance. But that abundance is not infinite. It is not enough to feed our people and our cars, especially in the face of natural disaster. Feeding America requires a public, private, and government partnership focused on food for people. Congress must revisit this policy and make sure that the needs of our families come first.

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