

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Funds cut from infant food program

It's cheaper than bailing out one S&L, but somehow Washington can't afford food supplements for poor babies.

Taking food from the mouths of babes—that is the latest innovative budget cut from the Bush administration, with the connivance of Congress. Funds and commodities have been slashed from the Supplemental Feeding Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to the point that malnutrition will be guaranteed for thousands of infants and new mothers.

Started in 1974, the WIC program has come to serve nearly one-third of all babies born in the United States. The plan provides vouchers to 4.5 million expectant and new mothers and young children who are at high risk for malnutrition. The chits are used by the mothers at grocery stores, in exchange for a set list of nutritional items: orange juice, milk, baby formula, cereal, and so forth.

However, this year the \$2.1 billion allocated by the federal government to WIC has not been sufficient to cover the increased costs of these supplemental foods. The Federal Food and Nutrition Service had wrongly estimated that food prices would rise only 4% this year, but they are up by 8% and still rising.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is no longer providing stocks of milk powder and cheese from its Commodity Credit Corp. stocks. One year ago, the USDA announced that it would no longer provide these items to school lunch programs, because "the cupboard was bare." And over the past eight months, the USDA has ceased providing them to young mothers and preschool children. Without proper nutrition for the first two years of life, ir-

reparable damage can occur to the individual.

So, thanks to the government's inability to increase the sum of \$2.1 billion—barely the cost of bailing out one troubled Texas thrift institution—thousands of mothers and children will be stricken with malnutrition.

Studies done by both the USDA and the Government Accounting Office (GAO) have shown that the tiny WIC program resulted in a measurable improvement in the health of America's young.

The USDA survey, which spanned a several-year time period, was the occasion of a scandal last winter, because the GAO found that USDA officials had tried to doctor the results to play down the efficacy of the WIC program. The motivation behind this was obvious: The Reagan and Bush agriculture secretaries have been attempting to rationalize a whole series of cutbacks in programs related to nutrition and farm support, so there was an aborted attempt by the USDA to say that WIC was not effective and should be cut.

This was exposed as false early in 1990, and the GAO study clearly showed how critical the WIC margin of food is to the very young. Each dollar cut hurts the present *and* future of an American child.

States are now scrambling to determine how to mitigate the effects of the cutbacks, with no success. Some local officials are cutting back on the amount, or type, of any given item available to each individual. Other states are cutting back on the number of individuals eligible to receive food assistance.

And many states are doing both.

In California, as of June 1, the monthly juice allowance for children aged 3-5 was cut from 288 ounces down to 144 ounces. The state will also eliminate vouchers to obtain cheese.

In Texas, the cereal allowance for 1- and 2-year-olds has been cut from 36 ounces per month to 24 ounces.

Texas will drop 27,000 of the 357,000 people it serves. Missouri will drop 14,000 children from the program. Oklahoma will cut 15,000 people from its 40,000-person caseload. Iowa will cut 4,000 from its 49,000-person caseload. New York will cut 20,000 from its roster of 380,000.

Some states, such as Connecticut, have tried to implement economies in the use of WIC vouchers in order to keep providing some form of supplement. The state no longer allows the use of federal WIC funds for orange juice, and requires the mother to obtain grapefruit, pineapple, or any juice that is cheaper than orange.

To rationalize these cuts, state officials are resorting to all kinds of grisly cost-accounting practices, whose results will be measurable in terms of human misery.

Texas officials are dropping from the WIC program people who, although they may be malnourished, are at present showing no clinical signs of malnutrition.

The director for the Missouri food and nutrition program, C. Richard Blount, said that if children in Missouri who have been cut off from WIC assistance begin to show signs of malnutrition, then maybe they can be re-qualified to receive benefits. However, to compensate for helping these young ones, then the state will have to take money-saving steps to cut some other category of person from the relief rolls.