

# USDA Food and Nutrition Service: Food Distribution

## FD Disaster Assistance

As part of the Federal Emergency Response Plan, Food and Nutrition Service's Food Distribution Division has the primary responsibility of supplying food to disaster relief organizations such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army for mass feeding or household distribution. Disaster organizations request food and nutrition assistance through State agencies (see end of document) that run USDA's nutrition assistance programs. State agencies notify USDA of the types and quantities of food that relief organizations need for emergency feeding operations.

## About Disaster Assistance

Agencies of USDA help in many ways in a disaster, but perhaps the most immediate is to ensure that people have enough to eat. There are many concerns following a storm, earthquake, civil disturbance, flood or other disaster, but none is more important than providing food in areas where people may find themselves suddenly, and often critically, in need. Through its Food and Nutrition Service, USDA assists in three ways:

1. Provides commodity foods for shelters and other mass feeding sites.
2. Distributes commodity food packages directly to households in need.
3. Issues emergency food stamps.

Every State and U.S. territory has on hand stocks of commodity foods that are used for USDA-sponsored food programs. The Child Nutrition Commodity Support Program, which includes the National School Lunch Program, The Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations are some of the USDA programs for which States maintain stocks of commodity foods.

In an emergency, USDA can authorize States to release food stocks to disaster relief agencies to feed people at shelters and mass feeding sites. If the President declares a disaster, States can also, with USDA approval, distribute commodity foods directly to households that are in need as a result of an emergency. Such direct distribution takes place when normal commercial food supply channels such as grocery stores have been disrupted, damaged or destroyed, or can't function for some reason such as lack of electricity.

## Commonly Asked Questions

### ***Where does the commodity food come from?***

Every State and U.S. territory has on hand stocks of commodity foods that are used for USDA-sponsored food programs. The National School Lunch Program, The Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations are some of the USDA programs for which States maintain stocks of commodity foods.

In an emergency, USDA can authorize States to release these food stocks to disaster relief agencies to feed people at shelters and mass feeding sites. If the President declares a disaster, States can also, with USDA approval, distribute commodity foods directly to households that are in need as a result of an emergency. Such direct distribution takes place when normal commercial food supply channels such as grocery stores have been disrupted, damaged or destroyed, or can't function for some reason such as lack of electricity.

***What types of food are provided?***

USDA gives a wide variety of foods to relief organizations to provide meals to disaster victims. Emphasis is on food that requires little or no preparation. For example, during 1998, USDA provided such items as canned juice, canned meat, and canned fruits and vegetables. Baby food and infant formula were also provided when needed

***What if a State doesn't have enough food on hand?***

If a State doesn't have enough food on hand to meet emergency needs, USDA makes arrangements for food to be shipped from other States or from USDA's own food inventories. The Secretary of Agriculture can authorize special funding to buy or replenish USDA food stocks that are used in an emergency.

***How does the USDA get food to where it's needed?***

Transportation of food donated by USDA for disaster relief efforts is normally handled by commercial carriers. Shipping arrangements are made by the supplier or, if food is being shipped from program inventories, by USDA's Kansas City Commodity Office. In some situations, the military or other public and private emergency assistance agencies are called on to assist in transporting food quickly to where it is needed.

***How does the USDA decide to issue emergency food stamps?***

USDA can authorize the issuance of emergency food stamps when there is a Presidential declared emergency or when grocery stores or other regular commercial food supply channels have been restored following a disaster. In order for a disaster food stamp program to be established, States must request that USDA allow them to issue emergency food stamps in areas affected by a disaster.

The disaster food stamp system operates under a different set of eligibility and benefit delivery requirements than the regular Food Stamp Program. People who might not ordinarily qualify for food stamps may be eligible under the disaster food stamp program if they have had disaster damage to their homes, or expenses related to protecting their homes, or if they have lost income as a result of the disaster, or have no access to bank accounts or other resources.

People who are already participating in the regular Food Stamp Program may also be eligible for certain benefits under the disaster food program. Each household's circumstances must be reviewed by the certification staff to determine whether a particular household is eligible.

***Why does the USDA provide disaster relief?***

The Food Stamp Act of 1977 and the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act of 1988 give the Secretary of Agriculture authority to issue emergency food stamps during emergencies. The Stafford Act also directs the President to ensure that adequate stocks will be available for mass feeding in a disaster situation.

Other authorizing legislation includes Section 416 of the Agricultural Act of 1949; Section 32 of the Act of August 24, 1935; and Section 4(a) of the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973. Federal regulations governing disaster assistance can be found in 7CFR, Part 250.

***How much money does FNS spend on disaster relief?***

Disaster food stamp benefits for FY 2002 total \$21,436,686. Value of Commodities for FY 2002 total \$731,174. So far in Fiscal Year 2003, disaster food stamp benefits total \$20,249,356 and commodities total \$36,916.

***Where does the money come from?***

The money to redeem emergency food stamps comes from the Food Stamp Program's appropriation. Money to buy and replenish food stocks used in emergencies comes from special funds that are available to the Secretary of Agriculture for food purchases.

***Who should I contact for more information about emergency food and nutrition assistance in disaster situations?***

For more information about the emergency food and nutrition assistance operations in your area, contact your State Distributing Agency.

California Food Distribution Program  
Department of Education  
Child Nutrition Programs

Peggy Tolley, Chief Food Distribution Programs  
560 J Street, Suite 270  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
Tel: 916- 324-9874  
Fax: 916- 327-8969  
E-mail: [ptolley@cde.ca.gov](mailto:ptolley@cde.ca.gov)  
Programs: NSLP, CACFP, SFSP

Violet Henry, Manager  
Processing Specialist  
Tel: 916-323-0319  
Fax: 916-327-4004  
E-mail: [vhenry@cde.ca.gov](mailto:vhenry@cde.ca.gov)

Peggy Tolley, R.D., M.S.  
Manager, Food Distribution Program  
Nutrition Services Division  
Tel: 916- 324-9874  
Fax: 916- 327-8969  
E-mail: [ptolley@cde.ca.gov](mailto:ptolley@cde.ca.gov)