

Food Stamps Go to a Record 37.2 Million, USDA Says

By Alan Bjerga

Dec. 8 (Bloomberg) -- A record 37.2 million people, or about one out of every eight Americans, received [food stamps](#) in September, as the recession drove a surging jobless rate, according to a government report.

Recipients of the subsidy for retail-food purchases climbed 18 percent from a year earlier, according to a [statement](#) posted today on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Web site. Participation has set records for 10 straight months.

The government boosted food aid as [unemployment](#) soared, heading to a 26-year high of 10.2 percent in October. The jobless rate cooled to 10 percent last month, the Labor Department said on Dec. 4.

"We've been working to get that money out the door" to families that need assistance, Deputy Agriculture Secretary [Kathleen Merrigan](#) said last week in an interview.

Nevada had the [biggest increase](#) in food-stamp participation rates from a year earlier, surging 54 percent, followed by a 46.5 percent jump in Utah, according to the USDA. Texas had the most recipients at 3.1 million, followed by California with 2.9 million and New York with 2.6 million.

Recipients increased in every state and the District of Columbia, except Louisiana. Because of a [sharp rise](#) after Hurricanes Ike and Gustav in 2008, the number of people in Louisiana getting [food stamps](#) fell 65 percent in September from a year earlier. Gains of more than 30 percent from 2008 were reported in 18 states.

35 Million Budgeted

About 35 million people are expected to receive food stamps each month through the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) in the fiscal year that began Oct. 1, according to the budget that President [Barack Obama](#) sent to Congress in May.

"In this economic time, SNAP has been essential," Merrigan said. The participation rate of state residents who are eligible for food stamps varies widely, the USDA said last month in a [report](#) based on 2007 data.

In Missouri, about 100 percent who were eligible that year took advantage of the program, the highest rate in the nation, followed by residents of Maine and Michigan, at 91 percent and 89 percent, respectively, the USDA said. Wyoming's participation rate of 47 percent was the lowest in fiscal 2007, followed by California and Idaho at 48 percent and 50 percent, according to the study.

Nationwide, participation in the food-stamp program was 66 percent of those eligible for the aid in 2007, the USDA said. The department has budgeted for a rate of 68 percent in the current 2010 fiscal year.

"We know of a lot of people who are SNAP-eligible who are not participating in the program," Merrigan said. "We are working with states to improve participation."

To contact the reporter on this story: [Alan Bjerga](#) in Washington at abjerga@bloomberg.net.

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