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Technical questions:

Federal stimulus package increases food stamp benefits and boosts local economies

Oregonians will soon have increased food benefits under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which calls for a more than 13 percent increase in federal food stamp benefits.

Governor Ted Kulongoski says the increase helps in two ways. The added benefits will help people who are feeling the impact of the economy and also help local communities by putting more money into the local economy.

"A growing number of Oregon families are struggling to make ends meet and this additional assistance is critical to helping them through this difficult time," says Governor Kulongoski. "In addition to putting food on the table, these stimulus dollars provide a direct economic benefit to our local communities as Oregon families spend these dollars at grocery stores and farmers markets."

The 13.6 percent increase in food stamps benefits goes into effect April 1, 2009, when assistance for a family receiving the average amount of \$176 per month would increase by about \$24 per month, for a total new amount of \$200. For a family of four receiving the maximum benefit of \$588, the amount would increase by \$80, to approximately \$668.

Additionally, the extra benefits mean a sizeable increase in federal food stamp dollars going into Oregon communities through the program. About \$60.4 million in federal food stamp benefit dollars flowed into Oregon communities in February alone – and estimates are that Oregon's share of the ARRA food stamp increase will be \$190 million for the 2009-2011 biennium.

According to analysis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Economy.com, food stamp dollars are multiplied in the community and provide economic benefits of between \$1.73 and \$1.84 for every dollar spent.

Last month, one in seven Oregonians counted on federally funded food stamps to supplement their food budget. The highest rate of Oregonians receiving food stamps is 24 percent, nearly one in four people, in Jefferson County.

"This increase will be a much-needed help to our clients who are having a tough time," said Belit Stockfleth, manager of the Food Stamp Program for the Department of Human Services. "We're continuing to see record numbers of Oregonians receiving food stamp benefits."

New figures show that food stamp demand continues to rise, and more than 20,000 new Oregonians qualified and received food stamps in the past month alone for a total of 554,665 people. Demand has increased 21 percent over February 2008.

No special action is required for food stamp recipients to receive the increased benefit amounts: the percentage increase will be calculated and added to their Oregon Trail cards automatically after April 1.

"People shouldn't be surprised when they see a larger amount on their card. It's not an error," says Stockfleth. "You do not have to repay it. These are increased benefits to help people through this difficult economic time."

While nearly all counties in Oregon have seen increased demand, some have been hit harder than others. Click here to see a breakdown by county of demand for food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/data/main.shtml

Background information:

To qualify for food stamps, families must earn less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level, along with other qualifying factors. For a family of four, the income limit is less than \$3,400 per month. Benefits are determined on a sliding scale, based on household income, and are distributed through the "Oregon Trail Card" that is used like a debit card to purchase food. Food stamp benefits are intended only as a supplement to a family's food budget, not to cover it entirely.

To learn if you might be eligible for food stamps, TANF, Oregon Health Plan or other services, visit your local DHS Food Stamps office. To download applications for TANF and food stamps, go to: www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance/.

DHS also partners with SafeNet to help people to find local resources such as local food pantries or other assistance. The number is 800-SAFENET (800-723-3638).