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Department of Social Services Requests Immediate Food Commodity Assistance for Impacted Families from USDA

BATON ROUGE - The Louisiana Department of Social Services (DSS) today submitted a request to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) requesting immediate food commodity assistance for individuals and families in 14 coastal parishes impacted by the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Estimates indicate that approximately 47,000 households may experience a need for food assistance due to these events," said DSS Secretary Kristy Nichols. "Replenishing food bank inventories with an infusion of commodities is essential to preventing low-income families and elderly citizens from going hungry as resources are directed towards the coastal parishes due to the oil spill."

The request to the USDA lays out DSS' case that, although Louisiana is currently operating under the Oil Pollution Act (OPA), the Commodity Program qualifies as "Situation of Distress," when "a natural catastrophe or other event has not been declared by the President to be a disaster, but which, in the judgment of the State Distributing Agency or FNS, warrants the use of a USDA-donated foods for congregate feeding or household distribution."

"We feel that the serious and immediate economic impact that Louisiana's fishermen and those whose businesses support fishermen felt when the state closed fishing zones and oyster beds qualifies as a 'Situation of Distress,'" said Nichols.

The USDA Commodity Program provides basic food items for household consumption, including items like canned goods, cereal bars, rice, water, juice and toiletries. The goods are given to food banks in affected areas for distribution.

Even before the events in the Gulf, these 14 parishes -- Cameron, Iberia, Jefferson, Lafourche, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. John, St. Mary, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, Terrebonne and Vermilion - had seen large increases in the number of people in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In some cases, nearly 8,000 additional households a month qualified for the program.

The repercussions from the oil spill are expected to impact these parishes even more, leaving more unemployed, fewer opportunities for short-term employment, loss of fishing, tourism and recreation-based economies, potentially for a long period of time.

DSS and the Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana are already working to provide food assistance to impacted families. Second Harvest, in conjunction with DSS, provided 350 emergency food boxes to 150 families in Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes this week.

A \$100,000 grant from BP delivered Thursday will provide additional food assistance for those parishes for one month.

Additionally, DSS has taken nearly 300 new applications for the SNAP this week in St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, Lafourche and St. Tammany parishes as part of an outreach campaign targeted at impacted families.

DSS has also requested several waivers for the SNAP program that will help expedite the application process, require less verification from applicants and exclude insurance payments, payments from BP or business accounts as applicant income.

"DSS is exploring every possible way to bringing food assistance to all of coastal Louisiana expected to feel the effects of the oil spill," said Nichols. "Our commitment is to ensure that the people of Louisiana's coastal parishes do not go hungry because of the tragic incident.

For more information related to the oil spill, visit www.emergency.louisiana.gov. Connect with us on www.facebook.com/GOHSEP and on Twitter @GOHSEP. View photos from the state's response efforts at www.flickr.com/photos/lagohsep.