**GOP rep unveils 'Crumbs Act' to make bonuses tax-free, in swipe at Pelosi -- 2/14/18**

A Republican lawmaker is set to unveil legislation that would make most bonuses given out as a result of President Trump's tax reform plan tax-free -- and took a jab at House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi with the bill's name.

Rep. Todd Rokita, R-Ind., has dubbed his bill the "Creating Relief and Useful Middle-Class Benefits and Savings" -- or "CRUMBS" Act. Pelosi, D-Calif., famously referred to the bonuses as "crumbs" in criticizing the tax plan last month.

"Americans are receiving thousands of dollars in bonuses and more money in their paychecks thanks to President Trump's tax reform, but out-of-touch Democratic leaders believe they only amount to crumbs," Rokita said in a statement. "The CRUMBS Act will let Americans keep more of the money they receive as a result of President Trump's tax reform, and allow them, not the government, to choose how best to spend their bonuses

Rokita's bill would make bonuses received by workers in 2018 tax-free up to $2,500. Since tax reform was signed into law this past December, multiple companies have given out bonuses and pay raises in anticipation of increased tax savings.

According to a [tally by Americans for Tax Reform](https://atr.org/list), 346 companies have given workers bonuses or raises or increased contributions to employees' 401(k). Those companies include AT&T, which gave $1,000 bonuses to 200,000 employees; automaker Fiat Chrysler, which gave at least 60,000 workers bonuses worth up to $2,000; and moving company U-Haul, where more than 28,000 full and part-time employees received bonuses ranging from $500 to $1,200.

# Trump pitches plan to replace food stamps with food boxes

The Trump administration is proposing to save billions in the coming years by giving low-income families a box of government-picked, nonperishable foods every month instead of food stamps. White House OMB Director Mick Mulvaney on Monday hailed the idea as one that kept up with the modern era, calling it a "Blue Apron-type program" — a nod to the high-end meal kit delivery company that had one of the worst stock debuts in 2017 and has struggled to hold onto customers. Mulvaney said the administration’s planwould not only save the government money, but also provide people with more nutritious food than they have now.

The proposal, buried in the White House’s fiscal 2019 budget, would replace about half of the money most families receive via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps, with what the Department of Agricultureis calling “America’s Harvest Box.” That package would be made up of "100 percent U.S. grown and produced food" and would include items like shelf-stable milk, peanut butter, canned fruits and meats, and cereal.

But America’s Harvest Box, which USDA contends would save over $129 billion over 10 years, is not very comparable to startup meal-delivery companies like Blue Apron. For one, the Trump administration’s proposal doesn’t include fresh items, like produce or meat, which are the core of Blue Apron and its competitors. Such products perish quickly and are incredibly expensive to ship.

Asked about how delivery would work, USDA spokesman Tim Murtaugh clarified that states would “have flexibility” in how they choose to distribute the food to SNAP recipients. In other words, the federal government almost certainly would not be picking up the tab for any type of Amazon-style delivery system. “

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue praised the harvest box plan as “a bold, innovative approach” that would give SNAP participants the same “level of food value” as the current system while saving taxpayers money. The idea that USDA would provide millions of low-income people packages of food on a national scale has not been floated by conservative think tanks, promoted by industry, or sought by previous administrations. Murtaugh said the concept was developed internally at USDA. Mulvaney on Monday credited Perdue for it during a briefing at the White House. "Secretary Perdue wanted to give it a chance," he said. "We thought it was a tremendous idea."

Numerous questions remain, such as how these boxes would be customized for, say, a family that has a child with nut allergies — or for those who don't eat certain types of meat out of religious or personal reasons. The proposal was so out of left field that some anti-hunger advocates initially thought it was a joke.

Kevin Concannon, who oversaw SNAP during the Obama administration, was aghast when he saw the proposal. “Holy mackerel," said Concannon, who said it reminded him of when poor people had to line up and wait for local officials to dole out food and other welfare benefits. "I don’t know where this came from, but I suspect that the folks when they were drawing it up were also watching silent movies.”

Other anti-hunger advocates said the concept was reminiscent of wartime rations or soup lines during the Great Depression. The Food Research and Action Center, a prominent nonprofit group, called the harvest box idea “a Rube-Goldberg designed system” that would be “costly, inefficient, stigmatizing, and prone to failure.”

In budget materials, USDA said it would be able to deliver this food at "approximately half the retail cost," a claim advocates found hard to believe. Food-stamp recipients would get their remaining monthly allotment on debit cards that they can use in grocery stores, as they do now. The proposal applies to households receiving at least $90 a month in benefits, which covers more than 80 percent of SNAP recipients. That’s more than 16 million households. “This proposal focuses on ensuring that all SNAP recipients receive the nutritious food they need at substantial savings by harnessing USDA’s purchasing power and America’s agricultural abundance,” Murtaugh told POLITICO.

Grocery retailers also balked at the proposal, including the Food Marketing Institute — which represents major retailers like Walmart, Kroger and Albertsons, where tens of billions of dollars in SNAP benefits are spent each year. The industry argues that government-packed food boxes would simply be inefficient.

Jennifer Hatcher, the trade group's chief public policy officer, said grocery retailers had worked with USDA and Congress over many years to “achieve a national system, utilizing existing commercial infrastructure and technology to achieve the greatest efficiency, availability and lowest cost."

"As we understand the proposal in the president's budget to create a USDA commodity foods box of staples, each of these achievements would be lost,” Hatcher said. "Perhaps this proposal would save money in one account, but based on our decades of experience in the program, it would increase costs in other areas that would negate any savings.”

Administration officials pointed out that USDA already distributes commodities. Currently, such food items are largely shipped to schools, food banks and other organizations — which in turn distribute the food to those who need it. The Commodity Supplemental Food Program, for example, sends boxes of food to some 600,000 low-income elderly with the help of food banks and other nonprofits. The fiscal 2019 budget seeks to eliminate that program and combine it with the harvest box program.

However, a plan for SNAP recipients would be an exponentially larger undertaking, covering more than 16 million households. While grocery and meal-delivery companies are growing more common, their scale is still relatively small and largely confined to urban areas. Blue Apron, for example, has around 1 million customers.

There are also questions about how the government would get harvest boxes to rural and remote households and whether cutting SNAP benefits spent in stores would hurt mom-and-popstores in small communities. “This action would not only destabilize attempts to bring more healthy, fresh foods into the homes of America’s food insecure, but would keep dollars out of local grocery stores and farmers markets, which are critical assets to all communities,” said Jordan Rasmussen, a policy associate at the Center for Rural Affairs, a progressive rural advocacy group.

Concannon, who retired from USDA at the end of the Obama administration, noted that it would ultimately be up to Congress on whether to fund such a proposal — something he said that lawmakers on Capitol Hill weren’t likely to be even remotely interested in creating. “Even the people who put this forward have to know that the chances of this happening is the same chance of me captaining the next spaceship launching from Florida,” he said.