

USDA tightens food stamp rules

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The U.S. Department of Agriculture, in renewed efforts to curtail fraud and abuse in the food stamp program, is imposing stiffer penalties on stores that traffic in food stamps.

"We are eliminating the loopholes that have allowed people to black market food stamps through grocery stores," said Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Mary C. Jarratt. Under the new rules, stores caught trafficking in food stamps, that is, buying food stamps for cash discount, will be permanently barred from the food stamp program for their first violation.

In addition, stores that sell nonfood items, such as cigarettes and alcoholic beverages, can be barred from accepting food stamps for six months to five years for a first violation, one to ten years for a second violation, and will be permanently disqualified for a third violation.

Stepped-up investigations of food stores violating the food stamp program and stiffer penalties for breaking the rules are producing significant results in the war against fraud and abuse.

"Investigation of 5,455 food stores suspected of violations set a record high in fiscal year 1982. Since evidence of violations was revealed in about two-thirds of these investigations, we must conclude that this effort has prevented a significant amount of fraud and abuse to the food stamp program," said Jarratt.

USDA field offices educate each retailer in the proper handling of food stamps prior to the store's authorization to accept stamps and continue educational activities with stores following authorization. In addition, special visits are made to stores that are suspected of program violations, either through monitoring of food stamp redemptions or based on the receipt of complaints or rumors.

During these visits, retailers are told of USDA's suspicions, warned of their responsibility to assure that program violations do not

occur at the store, and advised of the possible consequences.

"The disqualification activities are given wide publicity in the area of occurrence," Jarratt noted, "and the deterrent effect, we believe, prevents further abuses of the program."

Nationwide, the Food and Nutrition Service has conducted more than 25,000 investigations from 1977 through September 1982. Evidence of program violations, primarily the sale of non-food items, was obtained in nearly 15,000 of these investigations. Since 1977, nearly 8,000 retailers were disqualified from the food stamp program as a result of these investigations. These firms were redeeming a combined total of more than \$396,169,000 worth of food stamps annually prior to their disqualification.

The periods of disqualifications ranged from 30 days to 3 years. It is evident that the investigations have prevented a significant amount of food stamps from being used and accepted fraudulently, Jarratt said.

For over 20 years, USDA has worked closely with the retail industry, providing training and promoting compliance with food stamp rules. Today, there are approximately 230,000 retail grocers authorized to accept food stamps.

In the vast majority of cases, grocers are eager to comply with the rules, since they are very protective of the food stamp portion of their business. Most would not want to jeopardize their participation in the program. For many small grocers, in fact, being disqualified could mean going out of business. Some of the larger retail chains actually run their own internal checks to be sure cashiers understand and obey food stamp regulations.

A Food and Nutrition Service investigator said: "If I didn't believe what I am doing is important, there would be a lot of Monday mornings I would find it very difficult to get into my car and leave, because it may be three weeks before I get home. Unfortunately, all we hear is the bad

part of the program, the waste part of it and the fraud. But we do see enough out there of people shopping who really need the help and you have to believe in the program.

But I find it satisfying if I can do my job and I can get these stores that are violating off the program. It's that much more money to go to the people who need it."

Cambria Co. gets 5 master gardeners

Five individuals from Cambria County are involved this summer with the Master Gardener Program. These master gardeners are some of the newest members to the Cooperative Extension's volunteer staff. The program is another way in which you can get advice on gardening. It was initiated this year in March in conjunction with Bedford and Blair counties.

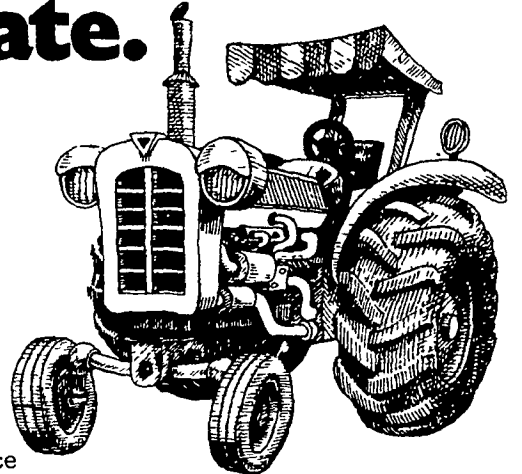
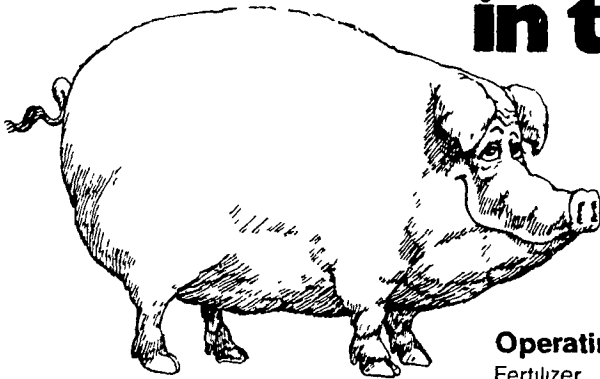
The accepted applicants met for six weeks and were updated on gardening practices and schooled in the various skills needed for the program. These people are active

gardeners and have had many years of experience. This, plus the back-up provided them from the County and State Extension Offices, make them a very qualified group to help people with their gardening problems and concerns.

Master Gardeners from Cambria County include: Charles F. Pease, Ebensburg; Joseph J. Link, Ebensburg; Edward Niemiec, Portage; Tony Capon, Ebensburg; and Earl Giraulo, Ebensburg.

Information can be obtained by calling 472-7350 - ext. 577, Wednesday through Friday.

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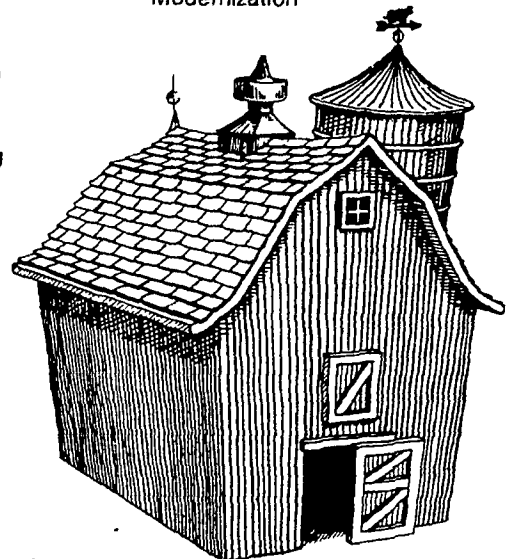
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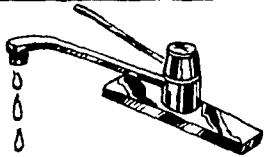


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