Trade wars stuff food banks to overflow

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Raising six children is a daunting task, especially when it comes to giving them nutritious food at an affordable price, which is why Ashley Bledsoe gets groceries at United Food Bank in Mesa, Arizona.  
But now United and many of the nation’s food banks that stock local charities with food also face a daunting task: trying to distribute the largesse of new food shipments from the US Department of Agriculture resulting from US President Donald Trump’s trade wars with China and other countries. Storing and transporting the food will be a challenge, food bank leaders say.  
On Oct 1, the Trump administration started sending surplus food to the nation’s food banks in a $1.2 billion program as part of its effort to bail out farmers hurt by its trade war.  
“What we are looking at is a 20 percent increase in those bonus items and mitigation food,” said Tyson Nansel, director of public and media relations at United Food Bank. “It’s excellent; we are very excited to be the beneficiaries of this food, but right now, we are desperate to get the food out.”  
Feeding America, a network of 200 food banks, estimated that distributing the extra food will cost $300 million to $400 million and has asked Congress and the Agriculture Department for more funding.  
Of the $1.2 billion or so of purchases to be spread over 12 months, pork is expected to account for nearly half, $559 million, followed by apples, oranges/orange juice, dairy products and pistachios — each at more than $80 million. The government also plans to buy other items, from beef to blueberries, to peanut butter to macadamia nuts.  
The USDA will distribute the surplus food through nutrition assistance programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which is then delivered to food banks, social services and child nutrition programs.  
The government estimates that 40 million people in the US live in households that are “food insecure”. Many depend on emergency food provided by pantries, often small charities based in churches and community halls that are stocked by the food banks.  
Nansel said United Food Bank serves 61,000 meals daily in a five-county area. It will receive 97 truckloads of food from the USDA from October through May 2019. He said the food will include pork chops, ham, grapefruit, potatoes, pears, milk and cheese. “What we don’t get a lot of is meat, so we are very excited to be getting this amount of meat coming in,” Nansel said.  
But how to distribute the bonus food to those in need is the issue. Nansel said it costs the organization 23 cents to deliver a pound of food, so the food bank is seeking to raise $350,000 in the next few months to increase its workforce and get the food out as soon as possible.  
In Contra Costa, a county of 1.15 million people in the San Francisco Bay Area, the surplus food shipments are puzzling to Caitlin Sly, program director at the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.  
“We basically have a very short window to accept additional products,” Sly said. “It’s very beneficial to us to have access to additional products, but it is posing a logistical challenge, as our space is not built to accommodate such a large amount, especially frozen food, cold storage, refrigerated food.”  
She said the nonprofit is getting 11 truckloads and potentially more food from mid-October through the end of March through the program. The food being offered to her nonprofit is mostly diary and pork.  
The food bank can distribute the food only to people who meet the income guidelines of the emergency food assistance program and who signed up for that program.  
“That presents some challenges, because we serve a lot more people than that, but we can only offer that food to the folks that meet those specific income guidelines,” said Sly.  
Sly said that the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano serves 178,000 people a month, but only 20,000 people meet the guidelines.

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