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A Governor Truly Tightens His Belt

By [WILLIAM YARDLEY](#)

SALEM, Ore., April 27 — He swore off beer, had to put the pricey organic bananas back on the supermarket shelf and squeezed four meals out of a single chicken, all in the name of reducing hunger. And this is not even an election year.

Gov. Theodore R. Kulongoski's decision to live on \$3 a day in grocery money for a week, as he had been urged to do in an [Oregon](#) "food stamp challenge," could confound the surest cynic. At 66, he was just elected to his second term, with a budget surplus surpassing \$1 billion and a legislature controlled by his fellow Democrats. So just what was there to gain politically?

For a governor who has long pushed to reduce hunger and happens to like eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, maybe that was not the point.

As Wayne Scott, the leader of the House [Republicans](#), put it: "Obviously I'm in the opposite party, so it would be easy for me to knock him for this. Now, I don't know that I fully believe that he's eating on \$21 a week, but I do think he's trying to bring attention to the food stamp issue. He's a pretty straight shooter."

Mr. Kulongoski, who said he had not tried to skirt a strict limit of \$21 for the week — the average amount allowed Oregon food stamp recipients — claimed that his only goal had been to raise awareness of hunger here and of a need for the federal government to preserve the current level of stamp benefits.

Along the way, however, the governor, little known outside the state, also raised awareness of himself. News organizations across the country picked up coverage of his shopping expedition to his local grocery store, where he was guided by a state worker who had temporarily relied on food stamps. Calls came in from Europe. Hundreds of people sent e-mail messages to the main sponsor of the challenge, the Oregon Food Bank, saying they too had been inspired to give it a try.

By the end of the week, not only had Mr. Kulongoski's relatively spare entry on Wikipedia been updated to reflect the developments, there was also a sense that the 5-foot-9, 155-pound governor had set a high standard for other elected leaders who profess to care about the needy. In Washington, the House Hunger Caucus asked members of Congress to undertake a similar challenge in May. Closer to home, Mr. Kulongoski noted, one of his West Coast counterparts would have a particularly tough act to follow. "I think Arnold probably has a larger caloric intake than I do," he said.

Mr. Kulongoski has made hunger an issue since he was first elected in 2002. That fall, he said in an interview, he was surprised to learn that Oregon ranked high on the list of what the Department of Agriculture used to call hunger and now calls "food insecurity." Oregon's timber and agricultural industries had long been struggling, driving up unemployment, and the high-tech boom that had benefited places like

Portland had started to unravel.

Since then, the state has fallen lower on the list, thanks to an improving economy and federal policies that allow it to expand eligibility for food stamps, said Michael Leachman, a policy analyst for the Oregon Center for Public Policy, which advocates for lower-income people.

Still, Oregon continues to have a higher unemployment rate, at 5.2 percent, than that of the country as a whole, 4.4 percent. High-tech jobs are growing again in Portland, but the timber industry continues to decline. “We have a very pronounced rural-urban split,” said William Lunch, a professor of political science at [Oregon State University](#).

Under a farm bill now before Congress, advocates for the hungry say, the rules that allow expanded eligibility for food stamps could be restricted, potentially disqualifying about 50,000 of the 434,000 Oregonians who use them. On Friday, Mr. Kulongoski sent a letter to President Bush asking him to preserve the current benefits.

The governor, a former labor lawyer, state insurance commissioner, state attorney general and member of the Oregon Supreme Court, noted more than once during his week on the low-cost diet that he grew up an orphan in a Catholic boys home in St. Louis. He said Friday that he had learned to clean his plate no matter what was on it.

With Mr. Kulongoski and his wife, Mary Oberst, limited to \$42 between them, what was on the plate became distinctly familiar. Ms. Oberst, who typically does their cooking — the governor has no kitchen staff — released a to-the-penny menu midway through the week that showed a single chicken surfacing first with zucchini on the side, and then later in salad and a “chowder.”

[The couple returned to their regular diet on Sunday afternoon. In a brief telephone interview on Monday, the governor said that eating less had clearly affected him. “I went to bed earlier,” he said, “because I was tired at the end of the day.” He also said he had missed his stash of Northwest microbrews.]

How much do the Kulongoskis usually spend on food? Hard to say. The governor’s office puts it at just \$55 a week, but that is for at-home meals only. Not included are things they eschewed during the challenge: meals at official functions, dinners out, and lunches and snacks bought on the job.

For all the public fascination with the governor’s menu, there did not appear to be immediate benefits for his policy agenda. Mr. Kulongoski’s proposal to provide health insurance to children by raising the cigarette tax failed in an initial vote during the week, though he said he believed that it would pass before the legislature adjourns in June. His plan to expand financing for community colleges has also stalled for now.

Asked if his lean week had bolstered his political heft, he said: “I don’t think it makes any difference. I’ve been in this for 35 years, and these things all pass. Next week they may not remember me being on the diet, but something will stay in the mind about hunger in Oregon.”

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