



## **MEMORANDUM**

TO: Chief School Officers March 1, 2005  
School Lunch Directors

FROM: Tom Osterhout, New York State Office of General Services  
Fran O'Donnell, New York State Education Department  
Gary Striar, American Red Cross

RE: Using Government Food Commodities during an Emergency

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A number of questions have arisen concerning the process for using government food commodities during a community emergency or disaster incident. There have also been questions concerning how the pre-existing agreement with the American Red Cross, for United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) commodity food usage, is to be activated and processed.

Understanding the process, for both the American Red Cross and New York State school districts, is a critical step to ensuring the swift and appropriate provision of food to your community in time of disaster.

Typically, the American Red Cross would activate the facility agreement for your building for use as a shelter and, for smaller, more localized disaster incidents, would bring in food to be served. However in larger disaster incidents such as a Presidential declaration or State declaration of emergency, and/or in certain types of smaller incidents such as localized flooding where access to food supplies might be more difficult, or when an imminent disaster causes the need for evacuation shelters to be opened, the American Red Cross could make a request to utilize the USDA commodities stored in your facility. A verbal request should be made to Tom Osterhout of the Office of General Services at (518) 474-5122, for approval of the release/usage of government commodities. If this communication is not possible, then you should use good judgment in making both your commercial and government foods available for use during the disaster/emergency.

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The process for the Red Cross activation of the agreement is stipulated in USDA regulations. Schools that maintain an inventory of USDA food commodities are authorized to release them to “recognized disaster agencies” such as the American Red Cross when a disaster occurs.

The American Red Cross may only use these USDA food commodities for the purpose of congregate/mass feeding (preparing and serving) and not for individual or family bulk distribution. Any distribution to households would have to be expressly approved by the USDA.

In all instances, your facility should be sure to keep specific documentation including a description of the disaster, the number of people requiring feeding, and the types and quantities of commodities used. This information is to be forwarded to OGS Food Distribution and Warehousing after the emergency situation has ended.

The American Red Cross will be following up with their local chapters to ensure they fully understand of the specific guidelines that must be adhered to regarding the use of government commodities during a disaster/emergency. Chapters will be reminded that after the mass feeding is completed, the chapter will be advised of what information is required to enable the facility and the state to report on foods used for disaster relief, including certification that all food products were used in accordance with existing regulations for mass feeding. Each New York State Chapter of the American Red Cross will receive an updated document providing a checklist for activation of the USDA food commodities as well as for the completion of the reporting process. This is currently under revision and will be shared within the next month. At that time, it will also be shared with each of you as well.

If you should have any additional questions regarding the proper use of government commodities, please feel free to contact Tom Osterhout at the OGS Division of Food Distribution and Warehousing in Albany at (518) 474-5122.

cc: All OGS Field Inspectors  
Steve Stathopoulos, USDA