

## PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

# Revamp of the Gov't Dietary Guideline Draws Congressional and Ag Fire

Thomas Vilsack, Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Sylvia Burwell, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) appeared before the House Agriculture Committee on October 7, 2015 to respond to criticism of the “Scientific Report of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee” by members of the Ag Committee. Chief among the complaints was the recommended strategy that public bodies consider using “economic and pricing approaches...to promote the purchase of healthier foods and beverages” (<http://tinyurl.com/nr2l6qx>) and “evaluat[e] the environmental impact of a food source.” As Secretaries Vilsack and Burwell note on the USDA blog, “Some of the things we eat, for example, require more resources to raise than others” (<http://tinyurl.com/nr12bz3>).

Every five years beginning in 1980, the USDA and HHS has established a Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) to examine the scientific evidence and make a report that their agencies can use to make dietary recommendations to the US public. Beginning in 1992, the dietary recommendations were presented to the public in the form of the food pyramid which was replaced by MyPlate in 2010. The updated recommendations, based on the 2015 study, are slated to be released by the end of the calendar year.

The 2015 committee said its “work was guided by two fundamental realities. First, about half of all American adults—117 million individuals—have one or more preventable, chronic diseases, and about two-thirds of U.S. adults—nearly 155 million individuals—are overweight or obese...[in part, the result of] poor dietary patterns, overconsumption of calories, and physical inactivity.”

The poor dietary patterns include the underconsumption of “vitamin A, vitamin D, vitamin E, vitamin C, folate, calcium, magnesium, fiber, and potassium... [and] for adolescent and premenopausal females, iron.” Following the dietary guidelines illustrated by MyPlate would alleviate this underconsumption and improve health outcomes for the nation as a whole.

The DGAC also raised specific concern about the overconsumption of sodium, saturated fat, refined grains and added sugars.

The “second [fundamental reality:] individual nutrition and physical activity behaviors and other health-related lifestyle behaviors are strongly influenced by personal, social, organizational, and environmental contexts and systems. Positive changes in individual diet and physical activity behaviors, and in the environmental contexts and systems that affect them, could substantially improve health outcomes.”

The committee wrote, “the U.S. population should

be encouraged and guided to consume dietary patterns that are rich in vegetables, fruit, whole grains, seafood, legumes, and nuts; moderate in low- and non-fat dairy products and alcohol (among adults); lower in red and processed meat; and low in sugar sweetened foods and beverages and refined grains.”

It also recommended “reducing screen time, reducing the frequency of eating out at fast food restaurants, increasing [the] frequency of family shared meals, and self-monitoring of diet and body weight as well as effective food labeling to target healthy food choices.”

Various elements of these recommendations drew the ire of supporters of the fast food industry, cattle producers, and food processors. Given the documented evidence that the current US diet is responsible for the increase in the number of people affected by food-influenced illnesses from diabetes to heart disease obesity, it is clear that it would be impossible to make a set of recommendations that would not offend some political constituency or other, including various agricultural producers.

According to an Associated Press story by Mary Clare Jalonick, “Vilsack and Burwell both said that the final guidelines would not follow the government advisory committee’s suggestions that Americans should consider the environment when deciding what foods to eat and that the government should consider taxes on sugary drinks and foods. Both said those recommendations are outside the scope of the guidelines after lawmakers, the meat industry and beverage companies pushed back” (<http://tinyurl.com/pyrao99>).

No doubt many agricultural producers will view the new guideline unfavorably. Yet it would be difficult for producers to effectively argue for the overproduction and overconsumption of products that can be shown to have short-and long-term negative health outcomes. To fight recommendations that are based on the best current evidence would likely erode the credibility of the industry in the long-run.

It should be noted that the guidelines did not call for the elimination of products like red and processed meats, sugar, and refined grains from the diet. It urged moderation. At the same time, it opened the way for increased production of fruits, vegetables, whole grains (which includes food grains like barley and millet that have limited production today), dried beans, and farm-raised fish.

These changes will affect some parts of the agricultural community, and some areas of the country, more than others. At the same time, because changes in diets occur gradually over time, the affected producers, supported by their Land Grant research institutions,

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will have the opportunity and time to adapt to changes in consumer demand.

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