

February 10, 2015

Secretary Tom Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW, Room 200-A
Washington, DC 20250

Secretary Sylvia Burwell
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Secretary Burwell,

We are writing to urge you to embrace the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee's (DGAC) recommendations for incorporating environmental sustainability into the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Doing so would be an important step in better aligning federal policies and programs in support of sustainable food production methods that will benefit public health and the nation's long-term food security.

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines state, "Everyone has a role in the movement to make America healthy. By working together through policies, programs, and partnerships, we can improve the health of the current generation and take responsibility for giving future generations a better chance to lead healthy and productive lives."¹

We believe the 2015 Dietary Guidelines will fall short of this goal if they address the nutritional needs of today's Americans without also considering the impact of our food systems on environmental health, or the nation's sustained capacity to provide enough nutritious and safe food for future generations to live active and healthy lives.

The 2015 DGAC publicly acknowledged, at their [seventh meeting](#) on December 15 of last year, that the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans can and should align dietary recommendations with both health and sustainability. For example, the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee's Subcommittee 5 reported that, "A dietary pattern higher in plant-based foods, such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, and lower in animal-based foods is both healthier and is associated with lesser environmental impact than the current average U.S. diet."²

There is a strong body of scientific evidence indicating that a diet with less meat and more plant-based foods is better for our health and the health of the planet. Heavy meat consumption, especially red and processed meat, is associated with increased risks of diet-related disease ([heart disease](#), [diabetes](#) and some [cancers](#)), while a range of plant-based diets are associated with a lower risk of these diseases.³

Furthermore, how food is produced can undercut other aspects of public health by eroding the health of the broader environment in which we all live. The vast majority of animal products consumed in America today are produced with large quantities of energy-intensive inputs (like water, pesticides, fertilizers and fuel) and presents what the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm

Animal Production characterizes as “...an unacceptable level of risk to public health and damage to the environment.”⁴

Therefore, we are asking the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Health and Human Services (HHS) to show a strong commitment to keeping Americans, and our shared environment, healthier by developing clear dietary recommendations on the need for reduced consumption of animal products and more plant-based foods.

Often ignored, seafood consumption is another key dietary component in which health and sustainability go hand in hand. Aquatic animals lower on the food chain have lower levels of bioaccumulated contaminants⁵ and are a more sustainable choice than larger aquatic animals, which have undergone drastic population decline.⁶ The next iteration of the Dietary Guidelines should therefore advise consumers to eat products lower on the aquatic food chain and to choose species that are not associated with harmful fishing or farming practices.

Americans rely on USDA and HHS to make evidence-based recommendations that inform our well-being. Abundant science now illustrates the synergies between healthy dietary choices and a sustainable food system,⁷ both of which, in turn, impact public health. Despite this fact, Congress is pressuring the scientific experts on the 2015 DGAC to exclude considerations for sustainability from their final report. To do so would be irresponsible, we argue, especially since current industrial food production methods can work to undercut the nation’s long-term food security, for example by contributing to biodiversity loss, soil degradation, water contamination, climate change, and antibiotic resistance.^{8,9,10}

Now more than ever, it is important for our government to encourage Americans to consider the methods by which food is produced. More sustainable methods, including organic agriculture and well managed pasture-based livestock systems, promote soil quality, conserve freshwater and other natural resources, promote agricultural biodiversity (which can conserve variation in micronutrient availability), and protect pollinators and other beneficial organisms. Sustainable food production can also provide adequate livelihood and good working conditions for farmers and other workers throughout the food system.¹¹

In their last meeting, the DGAC came to a consensus that there is a need to “recognize and place a priority on moving toward a more sustainable diet consistent with the healthy dietary pattern options.” It is now up to the USDA and HHS to move this vision forward by helping consumers understand that long-term individual health and food system sustainability are inseparable.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Georges C. Benjamin, MD, American Public Health Association
Stephen Wells, Animal Legal Defense Fund
Stephanie Feldstein, Center for Biological Diversity
Linda Rudolph, Center for Climate Change and Health, Public Health Institute
Andrew Kimbrell, Center for Food Safety
Nicola Milgrom, Ecology Center

Emily Cassidy, Environmental Working Group
Katie Cantrell, Factory Farming Awareness Coalition
Wenonah Hauter, Food & Water Watch
Dave Murphy, Food Democracy Now!
Ocean Robbins, Food Revolution Network
Danielle Nierenberg, Food Tank
Kari Hamerschlag, Friends of the Earth
Nicole McCann, Green America
David Wallinga, MD, Healthy Food Action
Robert Martin, Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Naeema Muhammad, North Carolina Environmental Justice Network
Ronnie Cummins, Organic Consumers Association
Cameron Wells, The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
Michael Dimock, Roots of Change
Richard McCarthy, Slow Food USA
Ashley Schaeffer Yildiz, Rainforest Action Network
Claire Gervais, Wisconsin Environmental Health Network

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