



Transition Memo – Policy Recommendations U.S. Department of Agriculture

The Obama administration must recognize that USDA is as much a health and nutrition agency as it is a farm agency. USDA should use its resources to promote safer, healthier diets along the lines that its Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend. Following that diet would mean eating more vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and nuts and less fatty meat and cheese, salty processed foods, and sugary soft drinks. Unfortunately, USDA does little to promote such a diet in its education, research, and food programs.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS THAT COULD BE TAKEN

- One of President Clinton's last acts was to propose a rule that would require **nutrition labeling of meat and poultry products**. After many journeys back and forth between President Bush's USDA and OMB, the rule is still awaiting finalization. President Obama should be able to finalize this rule quickly and help Americans choose more-healthy foods.
- USDA should make a public commitment to provide children with **healthier school meals**. USDA should provide additional technical assistance to schools, focus Team Nutrition grants on improving the nutritional quality of school meals, help schools meet the new HealthierUS Schools standards (which will be announced in January 2009), and have its National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) focus on improving the nutritional quality of school meals.
- Ever since BSE was first identified in U.S. cattle, USDA has promised to implement an **animal identification system**, similar to those already in use in Europe, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Such systems are essential to control potentially devastating outbreaks of animal disease such as foot and mouth disease. Despite consistent funding from Congress, USDA has not met its objectives for implementing the program. USDA should set clear timelines for premise registration and once that is complete, establish clear steps and timelines for achieving a program of animal and flock identification like those in use by other meat exporting nations.

Food Safety Mission

USDA's food-safety responsibilities extend to all meat and poultry products to certain processed egg products. Most recently, catfish was also added. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) employs about 9,000 inspectors to oversee 7,000 slaughter and processing plants. Under the statutes, USDA must visit plants on a daily basis. Plants that slaughter meat or poultry involve intensive carcass-by-carcass inspections by a government employee. That antiquated system is both ineffective and underfunded. Although several regulations have attempted to introduce more modern quality assurance programs, even inspected meat has been linked to



many outbreaks and recalls. FSIS could greatly benefit from a modernized statute, incorporating modern tools, like on-camera inspections and monitoring of live animal pens, more intensive sampling, and modern enforcement tools. Inspectors would likely be more fulfilled if they were using better equipment that would allow them to more effectively monitor carcasses for food-borne pathogens.

- FSIS's inspector vacancy rates of 10% to 20% pose a major challenge to adequately inspecting meat and poultry plants. In 2007, FSIS employed only 88 workers per billion pounds of meat, a 54% drop since 1981. That inevitably leads to more recalls and other program failures, such as occurred with the Westland/Hallmark plant that recalled 143 million pounds of meat because of violations of humane-treatment laws. **More funding for more inspectors is critical to protecting the public health.**
- FSIS should improve its programs and its capacity to capture and analyze data coming in from its field inspection. The agency has promoted moving to a **risk-based inspection** system. While such an approach is appealing, it must be built on a strong foundation. Data collection must be standardized across the regions, and inspectors should assess and share performance metrics for each plant they visit.
- The FSIS should adopt, or require industry to adopt, **robust sampling programs in slaughter and processing plants** to monitor sanitary conditions and pathogens loads on products on a regular basis. Sampling should be done through accredited laboratories. Contaminated products in production should be identified and traced back to their source.
- The FSIS should **adopt additional standards for pathogens** in meat and poultry products. While FSIS has performance standards for *Salmonella*, *E. coli* O157:H7, and *Listeria* are in use, standards are lacking for *Campylobacter* and other pathogenic strains of *E. coli*. Sampling programs should be specified that ensure more consistent application of the standards and promote continuous improvement.
- The safety of our nation's food supply is severely impaired by the division in jurisdiction over food safety between USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service and the Food and Drug Administration. The incoming administration should consider **combining those two agencies into a Food Safety Administration that would be either independent or housed at the Department of Health and Human Services**. This would allow the agency to devote its resources according to need and eliminate the chances of a problem falling through the cracks. **The Secretary of Agriculture should support such a transfer of responsibility**. Moving food safety out of USDA also would eliminate the department's conflict of interest between food regulation and food marketing.

Nutrition Mission

The American food supply provides an abundance of food, but all too many Americans are consuming nutritionally poor diets. The high content of saturated and trans fat, sodium, and refined sugars, and the low intake of fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains, contributes to obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, osteoporosis, and other



problems. As the nation's lead agency for promoting nutrition and health, USDA is in charge of numerous programs, including school meals, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps), WIC, and nutrition education. USDA has failed, to fully utilize its authority to improve diets and thereby improve health and health care costs, but now needs to do so.

- **Nutrition:** Working in conjunction with the FDA, USDA should **ban the use of partially hydrogenated oil** (the source of heart-disease-promoting trans fat) or **strictly limit the amount of trans fat to under 0.5 grams per serving**. Similarly (and working with the FDA), USDA should **limit sodium levels** in the foods it regulates. The high sodium (from salt, sodium nitrite, MSG, and other ingredients) levels in processed meat and poultry products tend to boost blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes.
- **School meals:** USDA should move as quickly as possible to apply **the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans**, as required by law, and thereby reduce sodium levels, reduce or eliminate trans fat, and increase whole grains, fruits, and vegetables in federally subsidized school and other meals.
- **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** (food stamps): The Administration should make the pilot projects funded in the Farm Bill to encourage healthier diets, such as providing bonuses for fruits and vegetables, a priority. It also should ensure that states can use SNAP nutrition education funding for effective public health and population-based approaches to promote healthy eating.
- In the 2009 reauthorization of the **child nutrition programs** USDA should support:
 - To help kids to consume **healthier diets and avoid obesity**, USDA should work with Congress to **update the nutrition standards for foods offered through vending machines**, a la carte, and other locations **outside of school meals**.
 - To improve the nutritional quality of **school meals**:
 - **Increase reimbursement rates for school meals** to cover increasing costs and help schools serve meals that meet the *Dietary Guidelines*.
 - Provide \$10 million a year for **non-food assistance grants** to enable schools to purchase equipment (such as refrigerators, salad bars, etc.) to improve their facilities and provide healthier, safer meals.
 - Remove the requirement that schools have to sell milk at “various fat levels” and **allow schools to serve only low-fat or non-fat milk**.
 - Continue to **improve the nutritional quality of commodities**:
 - Congress should **strengthen the local school wellness policies** by requiring school districts to:
 - Make their policies and implementation plans accessible on the Web;
 - Periodically assess implementation and update as appropriate;
 - Establish wellness policy committees (or work within existing health committees) to lead the development, notification, implementation, and assessment of school wellness policies; and



- Include policies for physical education and food marketing in schools.
 - Congress should **reform nutrition education** and provide reliable funding for the Team Nutrition Network. Funding of one cent per meal served in the National School Lunch, Child and Adult Care Food, and Summer Food Service Programs would provide about \$70 million per year for effective nutrition education and promotion programs coordinated nationally, administered at the state level to meet state needs, disseminated to the local level, and coordinated with school health programs. Funding should provide resources for training and certification in nutrition and food safety for food service directors in every state.
- USDA has oversight of **industry-funded research and promotion boards** for milk, cheese, beef, pork, and numerous other commodities. All too often, the promotional activities encourage the consumption of fatty products that contribute to heart disease. USDA should advise industry that all future promotions must be limited to **lower-fat and lower-cholesterol meat, dairy, and egg products**. Also, research sponsored by the agencies should focus primarily on improving the healthfulness of those foods. (Statutory changes might be needed.)
- **Producing more-healthy animal products:** With the saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium being a major cause of cardiovascular disease, USDA's ARS and ERS should develop scientific and other means of **improving the nutrition profiles of animal products**. Such measures could include subsidies for feeding cattle in ways that lead to a lower saturated-fat content of meat and milk, taxing and subsidizing the cattle industry to spur the marketing of leaner beef, and encouraging industry to cut the sodium content of processed animal products.
- **Improve the healthfulness of commodities** distributed to Indians, schools, etc. Currently, too many commodities contain unnecessarily large amounts of salt, unhealthy fats, and refined grains.

November 25, 2008