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Priorities Shift at the USDA

Luncheon Speaker, Friday, January 14th, 1994, noon
Moderated by Dan Padberg, Texas A&M

Ellen Haas, Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services

Thank you for inviting me to join in this discussion of marketing policies in the new U.S. Department of Agriculture. And—it is a new USDA. Secretary Espy's proposed reorganization of the department emphasized—as you know—six central missions which more realistically reflect contemporary concerns and needs. One of these central missions is nutrition. The new USDA recognizes that it is not enough for us to help produce food, or even distribute it better. We need to go beyond and establish nutrition programs that promote healthful eating habits, we need to help farmers *market* their products to meet such consumer demand, and we need to empower consumers with enough information to make healthful choices for themselves and their families.

To underscore his commitment to provide healthful food to all Americans, the Secretary has elevated the place of nutrition and consumer affairs at USDA. Under his reorganization plan, the Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services would become the Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services. President Clinton, too, has put nutrition and health at the top of the nation's agenda. The President has talked to the nation about personal responsibility, saying "We have to change the way we live if we ever want to be healthy as a people." One of the ways we have to change is the way we eat. And to change the way we eat, we must change the kinds of food we buy for our families.

In today's world we're all in the health care business. It's true of the food industry, and it's true of the Agriculture Department. We have a national health responsibility to consumers to help them

change the way they eat. The evidence cannot be more compelling. There is a clear link between diet and health. The three leading causes of death in the United States are diet related—cardiovascular disease, stroke, and certain cancers. Meanwhile, the American people are becoming more aware of health and nutrition. For example, recent studies show that many Americans are concerned about fat and cholesterol in their diets. The new USDA must meet its responsibility to American consumers to provide and promote the healthful products they need, as well as the information to make healthful food choices for themselves and their families.

The New Food Label and Other Tools

That's why the new food label is so important. The new food labeling law promises to be a very useful tool in nutrition education efforts. The label enables us to provide consumers with knowledge on exactly what they're eating. But the new food label is only beneficial if consumers understand what they're reading and can put into practice the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. So, we can't just glue the new label to packages and walk away. We have to explain what it means and how to use it. With proper education, the new label will empower consumers to make healthful choices.

Another important tool for consumers and for all our nutrition education efforts is the Food Guide Pyramid released in 1992. The pyramid graphically translates the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans into specific foods and servings.

This graphic is a powerful educational tool. A telephone survey of 502 adults conducted by the Gallup Organization found that the pyramid is encouraging Americans to change their dietary habits. The survey found that two out of five Americans who say they understand this food guide have changed their eating habits for the better since the recommendations were adopted. Yet there are still too many people who are not getting the message. The survey found that 62 percent of Americans don't understand the pyramid. And those people not familiar with the pyramid were 25 percent more likely to be overweight—and three times more likely to say they eat too much fat and too many sweets.

Question from audience: Aren't Americans growing weary of the fitness and health emphasis? Isn't there a growing resistance to all this?

Haas: There still has not been a really good overall effective campaign on good nutrition. What there is amounts to only a tiny fraction of the amount spent on food advertising in general. And there will always be a segment that wants to indulge. We're striving for a better balance—and 50 percent fat in school lunches is not what we want!

The School Lunch Program

Eating patterns and habits develop during childhood. Our National School Lunch Program serves the noon day meal to 25 million children each day. The program should influence children's eating habits both by serving healthy meals and by providing nutrition education. The generations of children who develop good nutrition habits at school will be the adults who purchase more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains, and other healthful products in tomorrow's supermarkets. We also want to bring farmers into the classroom to reconnect American children with the source of their food.

Thus, we have a special responsibility to our nation's children to serve nutritious, tasty meals that comply with the dietary guidelines. For the past several months, the Department has been looking at nutrition objectives for our school meals program. A recent study of school meals, the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment, found that virtually no schools serve meals that comply with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the government's policy on what constitutes a healthful diet. The study showed that school lunches exceed dietary guidelines for fat by 25 percent, for saturated fat by 50 percent, and for salt by nearly 100 percent.

This fall, I presided over four regional hearings focusing on the nutritional quality of our school meals. In Los Angeles, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Flint, Michigan; and Washington, DC, we heard from more than 300 people—doctors and nurses, parents, grandparents and children, teachers and coaches, industry representatives, farmers, chefs, and cafeteria workers—on the need to serve more healthful school meals. Another 2,000 or more concerned people wrote to the Department with their suggestions. Among them, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote to Secretary Espy that school meals *must* comply with dietary guidelines. Later this year, after appropriate and thorough review of the comments received, USDA will announce its nutrition policy for the school lunch program.

Other Food and Nutrition Service Actions

Through the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), USDA provides more than \$1.3 billion in commodities to its program participants; the largest consumer is the National School Lunch Program. USDA-donated food comprises nearly 20 percent of the food served in the National School Lunch Program. Given this tremendous buying power, common sense tells us that when the market learns that we want to buy low-fat mozzarella, there will be plenty of

low-fat mozzarella to buy. And that will mean lower-fat pizza for school children to eat. We are working with the Economic Research Service to make better use of our buying power.

At Secretary Espy's direction, in 1992 we doubled the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables we provide to schools. In addition, FNS is working with the Agricultural Marketing Service and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service to reduce the amount of fat, salt, and sugar in commodities. We are working with the food industry to incorporate new and healthier foods, and to change the specification of foods we purchase. Among the steps we have taken are:

Expanding the variety of poultry products,
Testing low-fat mozzarella and cheddar
cheese,

Testing low-fat turkey sausage,
Offering ground turkey burgers with a fat
content of less than 11 percent and beef
patties with a fat content of 10 percent,
and

Purchasing lower fat pork products and low
calorie salad dressing.

We're also studying ways to use our school program's food distribution system to better handle and transport fresh produce. We're working with the Produce Marketing Association to conduct a Fresh Produce Academy for 30 school food districts in the Mid-Atlantic Region of our FNS. This will provide training on storage, handling, and preparation of fresh produce. If it's successful, we'll duplicate this training for other regions.

Question: Doesn't USDA's current method of fruit and vegetable procurement mean higher prices paid and reduced availability?

Haas: Our plans are to take much more advantage of regional, seasonal supplies to improve the program.

Nutrition and WIC

Nutrition has been central to the WIC program since it was established. In just two decades, the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children has grown from a pilot project operating in a few countries to a national program serving six million women, infants, and children each month. WIC has been so successful, in part, because nutrition education has been built into the program. We will build on the WIC model to make nutrition education an integral part of our other food assistance programs.

Question: Are you changing the food stamp program to be more WIC-like—that is, WIC has nutrition education built into it.

Haas: Yes, along with other changes in the food stamp program, such as electronic transfer, rather than paper, we have plans to offer more nutrition assistance.

National Nutrition Campaign

To be fully successful, all our nutrition messages must be communicated more effectively. With this in mind, we are planning a comprehensive, coordinated national campaign on nutrition education. I am meeting with executives of the Walt Disney Company next week to talk about ways to reach young people with nutrition information that is lively and entertaining. We are working with professional chefs to help both those in the school lunchroom and the school classroom see that food that's good for you looks good and tastes good too.

We must enlist industry cooperation as well. Our nutrition education campaigns and the information we disseminate will not be effective if healthful foods are not being produced and marketed at a price that people can afford.

Industry Cooperation

Anyone who doubts how fast and flexibly the food industry can respond to demand has only to walk down a supermarket aisle. The number of products on supermarket shelves has, since 1969, increased from 8,000 to more than 25,000. More and more of these products are labeled low-fat, low-cholesterol, low-calorie, low-sodium. The shelves and coolers are filled with appetizing, healthful products that didn't even exist 15 years ago.

Industry is responding to consumer concerns, for example, by trimming more fat off meat and finding tasty fillers to replace the fat removed from products. But there are many other options to explore. Why not breed cattle, pork, and poultry to provide a low-fat product before slaughter and processing? Why not help beginning and limited-resource farmers move into the healthier-food chain and connect with our school lunch and feeding programs?

Conclusion

We have been entrusted as the co-guardians of our nation's health. We have established objectives but have not adequately met them. We must begin to close the gap between the dietary guidelines and their application in food programs. We will close that gap.

And we will continue to build coalitions to help us. If we can mobilize this nation's expertise in nutrition, in agriculture, in product development, in marketing, and in promotion, we will create a health-based marketing policy for food and agriculture that results in a healthier future for America.