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IMPLEMENTING AN EXPANDED FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICY: A CONSUMER VIEW

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For years, even decades, consumers have taken the food system for granted. Farmers produced good food, government regulated its handling, and free enterprise took care of the rest. That was about the extent of our knowledge. We thought that was all we needed to know. Perhaps that was fine, as long as we were satisfied with the end result — affordable food, adequate in supply, and assumed safe.

It hasn't been the incredible inflation of recent years alone that has caused consumers to take a harder, closer look at their food supply, although soaring food costs certainly are part of the reason. The rising costs simply underlined more substantive, nagging concerns about the safety and quality of our food. Our knowledge of technology and its effects has increased. Signposts for concerns began to pop up everywhere like so many weeds in a field:

- Research studies revealed some dangerous results of chemicals and pesticides used routinely on crops.

- Scientific evidence that additives and colorings added to our food supply are — at best — unproved to be safe and — at worst — proved unsafe — carcinogenic at absolute worst.

- The rise in the rate of diet-related disease.

- The glut in our marketplace of highly processed, nearly artificial foods.

- Increasing use of salt, sugar and fat in food products that don't require them, along with increasing scientific data on the linkage between these food substances and illness.

- The rise of the ubiquitous fast food chain that specializes in fatty, sugary, salty foods.

- The fact that natural foods, pumped full of chemical additives to make them look good, just don't taste the way they used to.

The fact that consumers were forced to pay more for food was galling, to be sure. But I think the most galling thing of all was loss of faith in our food supply, uncertainty about its safety, and confusion about its quality.

Consumers found themselves less knowledgeable than ever about what to buy to provide their families with a nutritious diet. What we had always accepted as presented clearly was not. The food industry was watching out for its best interests but the government, the people's advocate, was not looking out for ours.

The American consumer finally had enough, and began to voice his fears in the formation of a national food policy. This appeared to be the necessary first step in containing and directing the giant technology that had brought us to this point. Consumers—individuals and groups—have been working to develop such a food and nutrition policy for at least a decade. Their voices and numbers have grown with their experience. They have questioned saccharin, nitrite, inadequate disclosure of information, etc. Recent history, research findings, and court rulings have proved their concerns to be valid ones. In the process, we have fashioned a framework for a food policy that addresses our most pressing concerns. It is a framework that begins at the beginning: with the nutritional needs of consumers rather than the production possibilities or the retailing opportunities of farmers and the food industry.

On this point, consumers wholeheartedly agree with Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland, who said, "We think this country must develop a policy around human nutrition. . .and in that framework we have to fashion a more rational farm policy. We've been going at it from the wrong end in the past."

We would certainly not deny farmers, food processors, and retailers a reasonable return on their remarkable efforts. And they are remarkable. Rather, we concur with USDA Assistant Secretary Carol Foreman that "the challenge before us is to shape a new food policy that provides healthful food, and does this at reasonable prices with a reasonable return to those who get the food to our tables."

Over time our food system has evolved as a product of the economic system, with associated health objectives. Consumers have always assumed that these health objectives — i.e., that food would not only be a source of income for producers and retailers but a source of good health for people — would be part of any decision-making process that related to the food system. Within such a framework, health objectives were not specifically integrated into agricultural and food system program implementation.

These assumptions and the policy they fostered do not meet the changing needs of the public interest. Changing times, a more complex marketplace, and the growth of technology have significantly altered the food system as well as the actual food we eat, the way we

shop, and the amount we spend for food. The health consequences of our changing diet alone are incalculable.

The fundamental function of the food system is to serve the food and nutrition needs of consumers. In order to improve the federal government's role as the facilitator in this area, linkages of diet and health will have to be better understood and more effectively translated into programs to efficiently and effectively fulfill consumers' needs.

The following issues represent the kinds of areas we believe must be addressed programmatically. As these areas begin to receive the attention they deserve, implications for consumers will be far-reaching. Critical program components to be expanded in a food and nutrition policy meeting consumer as well as producer and industry needs are:

(1) nutrition surveillance, (2) nutrition research, (3) nutrition education, (4) information transferral and marketing activities, (5) food assistance programs, and (6) food safety and quality assurance programs.

Nutrition Surveillance

An effective nutrition policy must begin with a realistic picture of the client it serves — the American consumer. Policymakers should know not only the nature and magnitude of nutritional problems—which have shifted dramatically as a result of our changing diet—but also the identity of persons who can best be helped by intervention. To this end, nutrition surveillance needs include:

- the need for more reliable techniques to measure food consumption and faster, less expensive methods to assess nutritional status.
- the need for continuous monitoring of food consumption, nutritional status, and health of representative samples of the population.
- the need for more carefully designed regional and national nutritional status studies.
- the need for an organizational mechanism to provide oversight to and linkage among the various nutritional status studies and monitoring process.

Nutrition Research

There is general agreement that economic and social benefits of nutrition research are improved health and quality of life, and reduced incidence of diet-related diseases and disabilities. However, critics maintain that federal human nutrition research programs have not given adequate attention to our society's most pressing nutrition-related problems. Overall, nutrition research needs include:

- the need for reorientation of goals and priorities for human nutrition research to reflect on the most current health problems.
- the need for a central focus in government research policy and clearly defined responsibilities in program planning.
- the need for greater emphasis on applied nutrition research.
- the need for federally determined food and diet goals and standards.

Nutrition Education

A typical goal of nutrition education is to prepare children to make nutritionally informed decisions about food in the marketplace and home leading to healthful dietary practices in adulthood. The Head Start program, nutrition education components of the 4-H program, and the new School Nutrition Education Program are examples.

Another goal involves upgrading the knowledge and skills of adults, as in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program; the Women, Infants and Children Program; and the nutrition education components of the Nutrition Program for the Elderly.

A third goal, not directly tied to health or food assistance programs, is to inform the general public about research findings leading to health and diet improvement. It should also respond to public concerns about the safety, quality, and healthfulness of foods in the marketplace and provide guidelines which help individuals and families optimize the nutritional quality of consumption patterns. Nutrition information programs of Science and Education Administration, Food Safety and Quality Service, Food and Drug Administration, and individual Institutes of the National Institutes of Health conform to this type of goal.

Different health and food assistance programs have different nutrition education clients and priorities. As they have evolved, both in health and food assistance programs, they have been regarded as “tag-on” activities with no specific objectives, strategies or evaluation. With the exception of the EFNEP program, none of the intervention programs of USDA and HEW with nutrition education components was developed for the explicit purpose of improving nutrition skills, knowledge and motivation of consumers or clients.

The human result of these fragmented and inadequate efforts is a confused consumer, often overweight, over-anxious, and uninformed, trying to cope in an increasingly complicated food marketplace. Within nutrition education, these needs exist:

- the need for a comprehensive federal nutrition education strategy so consumers can readily understand the relationship of diet and health and the prevention of disease within the context of the food system.

- the need to establish specific roles, relationships and responsibilities of nutrition education programs.
- the need to develop evaluation methods for educational materials and programs in order to determine the most effective means of communicating nutrition information.
- the need to develop multi-media techniques for reaching the general public.
- the need to develop nutrition as an essential curriculum component for health professionals.

Information Transferral and Marketing Activities

In our society there exist two major avenues for providing consumers with information on specific food products. To some degree, government and industry pamphlets and public interest publications add to the information pool. But most information reaches consumers through the labels which appear on food products and through commercial advertising. Areas of concern include:

- the need for the development of a comprehensive labeling strategy.
- the need for a comprehensive and useful grading system for foods.
- the need for an evaluation of the purposes and uses of the Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA's).
- the need for a mechanism to sponsor nutritional advertising programs and campaigns.
- the need to develop methodology for advertising more nutritious, less processed foods.
- the need of a thorough overhaul of advertising of food to children via electronic communication.

Food Assistance Programs

Despite its abundant food supply, the nation has inadvertently perpetuated a continuing and seemingly endless cycle of hunger and poverty for some of its citizens. Public concern coupled with congressional action throughout the last decade has resulted in great strides toward solving these problems, although they still persist.

Several major programs—most administered by the Department of Agriculture—have been created or expanded since the late 1960's to address America's hunger, but they often have approached the problem through the back door. These programs, including food stamps and school feeding initially were established as an outlet for agricultural surpluses. Too little attention has been paid to the nutritional adequacies of these programs for their beneficiaries — primarily the poor and otherwise nutritionally disadvantaged.

Concerns in this area include:

- the need for a clearer, more consistent set of goals for federal food programs.
- the need to determine the impact of federal food assistance programs as part of a national strategy for eliminating poverty.
- the need to address the public misconceptions about purposes and uses of federal food programs.
- the need to assess the success or failure of all levels of government (federal, state, local) administering programs in terms of nutritional improvement.
- the need to determine if access to the food distribution system is adequate where the poorest shop for food.

Food Safety and Quality Assurance Programs

Historically, our *de facto* food policy has served primarily the special economic interests of the agricultural production and processing sector. Food safety and quality as an adjunct of the health concerns of consumers has been assumed in this system, but has never actually been laid as a cornerstone on which a food policy could be built. As such, efforts to achieve a safe and high quality food supply have come sporadically and, almost without exception, in response to consumer outcry and crisis.

For example, throughout the 1950's and 1960's, the Department of Agriculture maintained no formal standards for fat content in processed meats, thereby allowing processors the complete freedom to use whatever quantity they wished. When pressure was finally brought to bear in 1969 and a 30 percent maximum was established, some processed products contained up to 50 percent fat, certainly to the unwitting detriment of most consumers.

The ground work has been laid, but as of yet the institutionalization of food safety and quality as a priority objective in the food production and processing sector has not been realized. Priority concerns in this area include:

- the need to determine how far the government's responsibility for food safety extends.
- the need for a comprehensive and unified food safety philosophy.
- the need to establish consumer responsive goals for technology transfer.
- the need to resolve the food "safety" and "value" questions.
- the need for retail and restaurant food monitoring.
- the need to determine health implications of the use of drugs, hormones, and other chemicals on food animals and crops.

—the need to focus increased attention on the regulation of carcinogens.

These are the needs consumers see as an essential part of a developing food and nutrition policy. As I have outlined them here, these needs represent one end of the spectrum. At the other end is the impact the fulfillment of these needs would have on consumers. That impact would be favorable and far-reaching. We believe the impact would also be favorable for producers and retailers and all others who have a stake in our food system.

At this point we all share the opportunity to improve that food system so that it responds to the needs of all who are a part of it. By addressing the policy issues I have outlined above, I believe we can help assure the most favorable impact for all concerned.

