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## ISSUES IN U.S. FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICY

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For years people have observed that there are new participant forces influencing the food and agricultural policy agenda. Don Paarlberg's 1974 "new agenda" speech is a well-known example. The recurring theme of these talks is that the policy context must be broadened to explicitly encompass the new "food policy" setting.

Rather than focus on those issues which distinguish between food and farm policy, my approach is to search for a middle ground. Simply stated, the theme of this talk is that a broad food policy statement encompasses both the traditional farm and the contemporary nutrition programs. My contention is that such a broad policy is not new at all. But, while the policy per se has been essentially unchanged, program emphasis to implement the policy has been evolving over the years. The emphasis in recent years, I will argue, has been on the development of programs relating to the nutrition, safety, and quality aspects of the broader food policy.

### **The Food Policy Statement**

The food policy statement is not as complicated, nor as controversial, as it is sometimes thought to be. Essentially, it states that it is a matter of public policy to enact those programs necessary to ensure that there will continue to be an adequate, safe, wholesome, and nutritionally balanced food supply available to all Americans. Usually, in articulating the policy, there is also something said about "reasonable" prices and extending the benefits of the policy to people around the world.

Clearly, the focus of that policy statement is on human nutrition and on food. It explicitly recognizes: that the food system exists for the consumers of food; and that resources devoted to food production must be utilized so that the products resulting contribute to the nutritional well-being of society generally.

But while there may be agreement on the broad policy statement, there is little agreement on the specifics for implementing its various component parts. Almost without exception, attempts to develop programs of action based on the policy statement lead to quick and sharp disagreements.

Food system participants tend not to reach a consensus on the program-oriented definitions for “safe,” “nutritious,” “reasonably priced” or even “adequate.” Meat industry advocates, for example, downplay and even deny the existence of evidence linking relatively high levels of animal product intake with human health conditions. On the other hand, food-health advocates often tend to over-emphasize the often tenuous causal linkages between food consumption habits and the incidence of certain human health conditions.

Those of us in research or education positions cannot entirely avoid taking positions either, even if only implicitly. It is impossible to conduct social science research or teach public policy without a frame of reference — without some perspective. Because we are human beings with emotions and feelings, we do tend to lend support to arguments favoring one side or the other.

Typically, policy research from both USDA and the Land Grant University system has been on the farm production side of the more general food policy statement. Such analyses typically have focused on the “adequate” production aspects — on how to produce two blades of grass where one grew before. Seldom have our policy analysis or teaching efforts had as their genesis the human health or food price aspects of particular food issues.

The debate then, is not food policy versus farm policy or farm policy versus nutrition policy. Rather, it is on aspects of food programs, farm programs, and nutrition programs.

The openness of these debates about food policy implementation have generated some problems. As Prof. Jim Shaffer of Michigan State University would say, ultimately there must be a resolution of “whose preferences count.” Understandably, the food-health advocates seek solutions through changes in rules — through regulations. Since they tend not to have an organized influence in the marketplace, such efforts clearly offer the most hope for their “successes.”

The participants who were once almost solely in command of the agricultural policy agenda find that they must now speak loudly (and in public) just to be heard. Even agricultural scientists and policy analysts sometimes find the new setting somewhat uncomfortable. Increasingly, we are being asked to provide assessments of program on all participants in the food system. This is a task many apparently do not feel qualified or ready to undertake.

Top policy officials at USDA are aware of the discomfort this brings to the department’s traditional clientele, but are encouraging an even more open debate. Secretary Bergland told a joint Community Nutrition Institute-Food Marketing Institute conference group in

Washington that there is no longer a choice — our concept of food and farm policies must change. He said, “. . .necessity demands that we have a national food policy . . .a consumer-be-damned food policy is a luxury food system participants can no longer afford.”

The new emphasis on food and nutrition programs was evident in the goals he gave for the department. He said that programs would be designed and implemented to assure:

1. Continued adequate supplies of food at prices fair to both producers and consumers.
2. A safe, wholesome, and appealing food supply.
3. Access to nutritionally adequate diets for all our people.

### The Change in Emphasis

Generally adequate supplies have permitted us to broaden our food perspective and allow for an explicit consideration of other food policy issues. The consumer price impacts of agricultural programs continue to be routinely considered, but even beyond that, there is a renewed commitment to do something about nutrition, food safety and quality, and food assistance problems.

Why has this change in program emphasis come about? Is it, as some suggest, simply the result of consumer activist rhetoric or is this change the result of forces more fundamental? My view is that the forces encouraging change are quite fundamental and will increase in intensity as the years pass.

In the first 200 years of our country, the primary program focus was on “adequate supplies” — simply making sure that everyone had enough to eat. We formed the “agricultural establishment” — USDA, Land Grant Universities, Extension Service, Experiment Stations, etc. — in pursuit of that goal. Dramatic improvements in agricultural productivity occurred. But early success in achieving that goal created another set of problems.

Our farmers were producing more than could be consumed at constant real prices. Resource adjustments from the agricultural production sector began to occur rapidly. In less than 100 years we transformed our largely subsistence agricultural economy into one of the world’s most highly industrialized.

In response to the socially unacceptable, relatively low commodity prices, commodity specific price and income support schemes were developed for farmers. Adequate supplies could not be assured unless the farm sector was economically viable. The need to ease the resource adjustment process was recognized explicitly.

But at the same time farm prices were being supported by public policy, agricultural research and teaching programs were being accelerated — often justified as a way to “save the family farm.”

Over the years, what began as one aspect of a broader food policy came to be considered by some as the policy. Commodity price and farm income support programs came to be viewed as the nation's commitment to an improved food and agricultural system.

This does not mean that all other aspects of the broader food policy were entirely forgotten. Meat and poultry inspection laws were passed in the early 1900s. The Food and Drug Administration was established in 1927. The National School Lunch Act was passed in the 1940s. Food stamp and commodity distribution programs have operated since the 1930s.

In recent years though there has been a significant change in program emphasis. The Agricultural and Consumer Protection Act of 1973 represented an important departure in the process of food policy implementation. Provisions of that act separated income support from price support and provided direct payments from the treasury rather than through consumer food prices. The act also made it explicit that food assistance through a national Food Stamp Program was a way to assure that all had access to at least a minimally adequate nutritious diet.

With passage of the Food and Agricultural Act and the Child Nutrition and National School Lunch Amendments of 1977, we moved even closer to implementing programs to support the broader food policy. Admittedly, the change in emphasis was not as great as desired by some. Commodity price support levels continued to be the principal focus of that debate. There were, however, some significant changes in program design:

- a national grain reserve was established,
- the food stamp purchase requirement was eliminated,
- human nutrition research in USDA was given new emphasis,
- nutrition related studies of child feeding programs were mandated,
- the role of nutrition education was emphasized, and
- a competitive grants program for human nutrition research was established.

This change in the emphasis on food and nutrition issues is now being reflected in the policy development and implementation process. Within USDA, for example, public participation in decision-making is encouraged and an institutional structure for obtaining such input has been established.

A new Human Nutrition Center has added organizational importance to USDA's human nutrition research program. The administration of food safety and quality programs have been combined to achieve organizational effectiveness and form a coherent approach to program implementation. Food assistance programs are getting increased attention.

While some of these changes result from explicit efforts to foster implementation of a more general food policy, others are simply a reflection of the fact that food issues are perceived quite differently today. Agricultural production and other nutrition related problems are recognized as public issues, too important nationally to be resolved within a narrow farm policy context.

### **What Are the Issues?**

Contemporary food policy issues stem from formal recognition that public responsibility goes beyond the administration of programs to assure the economic viability of the farm sector. Food safety and quality, adequate nutritional balance, the linkage between diet and health, nutrition information and education are all presumed to be as important as programs to assure that adequate supplies of food get produced. Consider the following:

Chemicals have long been used to increase food production, retard spoilage, and preserve foods. But now many people express serious concerns about health-related effects of the chemicals themselves. Like it or not, there is a growing body of scientific evidence linking food and feed additives to human health conditions. As a result, there are frequent proposals to ban or otherwise regulate the use of these chemicals. In some cases, these chemicals have been used for hundreds of years and there are no known substitutes.

The current debate regarding the continued use of nitrite to cure meat is a case in point. We are all aware that a total ban would imply significant adverse economic consequences for livestock producers and meat processors. Most also agree that such actions imply higher prices for consumers.

These consequences probably can be calculated — at least within a reasonable range. But what about the human health costs? What are the relative costs of health risks from botulism versus cancer? Can we afford not to ban a known carcinogen? I don't know — no one does at this point.

However, we do take action with less than complete information in other areas. There is little scientific evidence which clearly puts an economic value on formalized liberal arts education. Those studies that are available make it difficult to justify the expenditure on a cost-effectiveness basis. We don't know how to calculate the benefits. But since our earliest days as a nation we have had mandatory publicly provided liberal arts education programs for our children. Apparently, even in the absence of "exact" scientific evidence, we have concluded that the benefit to be derived exceeds the cost.

Why, then, is it not possible to make the same kind of arguments regarding food safety regulation? Why is it that some participants in the policy debate contend it is irrational to make such decisions in this area without "exact" scientific data?

I believe it is because in this case we are talking about a change in policy. The fact is we made a decision years ago to permit the use of nitrite as a curing agent — even if it were a decision made without all the “facts.” A change in policy now implies the need for resource adjustments.

Technological changes in the food system are also causing concerns. They have occurred so rapidly in recent years that it is almost impossible for the average consumer to understand more than the most basic aspects of modern food processing and preparation.

We are all familiar with stories about children who actually believe that milk comes from the store. It's unproductive to continue denying that such rapid and fundamental changes are of no concern to food consumers. At a minimum, not understanding the essence of such changes results in a growing lack of trust by consumers.

Recent USDA proposals to clarify meat grades and improve product labels are attempts to improve communication between processors and consumers by standardizing the message. Obviously, rational decisionmaking can only occur if consumers have adequate information prior to the purchase. But determining what is “adequate information” is fertile ground for debate.

Lifestyles have changed dramatically in the past two decades, and so have food consumption patterns. There have been significant increases in the consumption of fat, sugar, and salt — foods at least tenuously associated with contemporary human health problems.

Also, higher per capita incomes, more working wives, smaller families, and relatively more leisure time have all been associated with an increase in meals eaten outside the home.

Educators and nutritionists alike express serious concerns about the effect of these changed eating habits on the health of the population. They contend that consumers are less capable than ever of making the food choice decisions that lead to nutritionally balanced diets. Some even contend that sale of selected food products should be banned. At a minimum, they argue for greatly expanded publicly supported nutrition education efforts.

Such recommendations immediately evoke debate on the government's role in determining food consumption. Who should decide what we eat, is a frequently asked question.

Government policy always has had an important role in determining what we eat. The commodity price support programs influence what is produced, hence what we eat. Our grains policy influences livestock production, hence the consumption of red meat. Export policies have made it both possible and impossible for us to eat certain foods. The Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA's) have influenced food processing techniques and our nutrition education efforts and, thus, what we eat.

Prof. Kenneth Robinson said at a USDA seminar last year, “. . . if government is really serious about changing what people eat, all it has to do is to make it unprofitable for farmers to produce certain foods.” At first glance, such a suggestion is lightly dismissed as being practically and politically impossible. Congress would never be able to pass legislation making it unprofitable to grow selected farm product. But, look at the converse: government policy has made the production of certain foods profitable. Who among us would argue that relative prices have not been affected?

Did we explicitly decide to make the production of fruits and vegetables relatively less profitable by making the production of other agricultural products (milk, for example) more profitable?

Public policies will never completely dictate what we eat, but they have, do, and will not doubt continue to influence our choices among available products. This is inherent in a regulated market system.

Nutrition education issues are admittedly difficult to resolve. What should the message be? Should it be a simple, effective message or should it stress the complicated pro's and con's? Should it focus on don'ts or provide alternatives? What should the alternatives be? Answers to these questions are not easy, but answers must be found!

### **The Need for Research and Public Policy Education**

There is a school of thought that research and education efforts — particularly public policy education efforts — may have little to contribute in resolving some of the contemporary food and nutrition issues. The argument is that these are essentially emotional issues and emotional issues tend to get resolved in the courts. But it is in just such a setting that research and public policy education efforts have the most to offer. Objective programs that effectively articulate the consequences of various alternatives potentially have a great deal to contribute. Such programs may even reduce the extent of emotionalism and result in conflict resolution outside the courts.

The initiation and conduct of such research and public education programs will require new investments in human capital. Those of us familiar with the agricultural establishment will have to learn as much about the food and nutrition policy setting. More importantly, we will have to accept its constituents as legitimate. We will have to play the role of moderator, helping the various food system participants find a common ground.

We haven't expected farmers to define researchable problems and we should not expect food consumers or consumer advocates to do that either. As public servants it is our responsibility to help all sides of each issue with that task.

The important issues needing our near term attention fall into four areas. They include:



## **Food Safety Regulation**

Food safety regulation is perhaps the least understood problem area on the new food agenda. There is seldom a reasonable discussion about costs and benefits of alternatives. In almost every case the real issues are terribly misunderstood.

A broad-based research and teaching program to determine and articulate the economic impacts of existing laws to regulate the manufacture, distribution, and use of food additives, animal drugs, and other chemical compounds used in food or animal feed for subtherapeutic and/or preservation purposes should be undertaken. Such efforts should help to make explicit the trade-offs with human health. The economic impacts on producers, companies of various sizes, and on groups of individuals must be determined.

We have a small effort now underway in ESCS to begin filling the gaps. While there is little previous research to rely on we are finding that the tools of economic analysis serve us quite well. There seems little reason to delay such work any longer.

## **Research to Determine the Consequences of Changing Technology**

Nutritionists contend that food industry practices, including advertising, are one of the most important factors contributing to present day nutritional decay. In large measure these industry practices reflect consumer choices and are encouraged by technological advances in food processing and retailing. Research to evaluate the extent to which these changes actually do benefit consumers is badly needed.

Economists have long recognized that there are important trade-offs between technical and pricing efficiency. We need research to document the magnitude of the trade-offs in specific cases. Some studies of the effect of high levels of concentration in retail food markets indicate that there may well be "monopoly overcharges." Others raise questions about the adequacy of these studies. We have the tools and the training to help resolve these issues, too.

## **Research and Teaching in the Area of Food Quality**

The quality of the food supply is becoming an increasingly important issue. In many respects this food issue should be the one most familiar to agricultural scientists. Most of the present food grades and standards of identity are products of the agricultural establishment. They were adopted years ago, and many have served well. But are they relevant today? Do consumers really know the difference between grades now being used? If not, then what is their purpose?

Research to evaluate present food quality regulations is badly needed. If such regulations are going to be responsive to present-day needs then we must have evidence indicating their economic consequences. Teaching programs are also needed. Policy decisions

are now being made on food quality issues — often the public is ill-equipped to participate in the debate in a meaningful way.

## **Food Assistance**

Most domestic food assistance programs were developed as programs to enhance the consumption of surplus agricultural production. Within the food policy context, though, the nutritional contribution of these programs takes on increasing importance. Today, little is known about the extent of nutritional support afforded by such programs. Really, we don't even know very much about how these programs actually contribute to farm income.

Some contend that the food assistance programs have not placed sufficient emphasis on nutritional balance. They have argued that food purchasing power is not sufficient to assure nutritional adequacy. But even beyond that, they argue convincingly that we know very little about the intricate interrelationships among income, education, race, region and the myriad of other factors influencing food choices among the poor. Here again, public research and education programs could contribute a great deal.

## **Concluding Comments**

In discussing contemporary issues in U.S. food policy, I have made the point that it is not the policy but rather the relative emphasis on program implementation that has changed. We have always had a food policy — a policy based on assuring that there would continue to be an adequate, safe, palatable, and nutritionally balanced food supply available to all Americans. However, the relative program emphasis on each aspect of the policy statement has changed over the years. Today, the emphasis is on safety and nutritional balance — adequacy is generally taken as given.

I have indicated the need for a broadened perspective on the part of the public policy research and education community. Ken Farrell stressed the importance of that need more than two years ago in his AAEA presidential address. Carol Foreman stressed it again, in her own way, just a month ago at the AAEA meeting in Blacksburg, Virginia.

The reality of the situation is that the U.S. will continue to develop a set of programs based on food rather than just farm policy objectives. Food-related problems are no longer considered only within the context of what appears good for farmers. The public is becoming increasingly involved.

Those of us who know the food system have an important choice. We can choose to ignore the present policy setting and argue defensively that nothing has really changed. In doing so, we force the teaching and policy analysis to be conducted by those who fundamentally don't understand agriculture. Or, we can accept the changes

as a challenge, broaden our perspective, and enthusiastically support the idea of a broadened constituency.

We can, if we choose, admit proudly to ourselves and our colleagues that agriculture has become so important that it is now “center stage.” To my way of thinking, there really is no choice. Teachers, by definition, are those who develop and transmit new ideas. We must be the food policy teachers—there really is no one else!