Agriculture Outlook Conference

United States Department of Agriculture
Washington, DC 20250-3900

Outlook '93

For Release: Tuesday, November 30, 1993

USDA'S RESPONSIBILITY TO CONSUMERS

Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Washington, D.C.

American farmers and food industry have much to be proud of when it comes to feeding people. Most Americans have plenty of food to eat at relatively low prices. And the kinds of food we eat have virtually eliminated classic nutritional deficiency diseases, such as scurvy, beri-beri, and pellagra. However, as malnutrition has been vanquished, medical research has discovered that the typical American diet promotes some of the most common chronic diseases. Tooth decay, constipation, obesity, diabetes, coronary heart disease, hypertension, stroke, and several types of cancer are strongly linked to the foods people eat. Those diseases account for hundreds of thousands of deaths each year and cost our country well over one hundred billion dollars a year. Diet accounts for more deaths each year than anything except cigarettes. The diet responsible for such illnesses, as the National Academy of Sciences and other agencies have concluded, is a diet high in fat -- especially saturated fat -- cholesterol, sodium, and sugar, and low in dietary fiber. Additional problems are caused by pesticide residues and food additives.

By contrast, diets low in fat, cholesterol, and sodium and rich in whole grains, vegetables, and fruit maximize the chances of staying healthy and avoiding diet-related diseases. Even more remarkable, studies done in the past twenty years have demonstrated that even advanced cases of heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes can actually be reversed by appropriate dietary changes.

As the government's lead agency for both nutrition education and feeding programs, USDA has opportunities and obligations to encourage Americans to eat the most healthful diets. The Clinton administration comes to these problems with a clean slate, fresh ideas, and enthusiasm. I'd like to suggest some of the things that I think USDA ought to do.

A. Nutrition Education for the General Public

Perhaps most importantly, USDA needs to do a much better job of informing the public about, and encouraging the public to choose, a better diet. USDA should gear information to a variety of educational levels, ages, dietary patterns, and ethnic or racial

backgrounds.

For starters, USDA -- in cooperation with the Department of Health and Human Services -- should tell the public what the best possible diet is. The public should know what diet would most effectively promote health and ward off disease. Currently, the government's recommendations call for only modest dietary changes. The current recommendations represent a political and cultural compromise: industries are not offended, and people aren't made to feel they must make substantial changes. The recommended diet is certainly not the best diet and would result in only modest health benefits. The kind of diet I have in mind might recommend a fat level of 20 percent of calories or less, saturated fat plus trans fats under 7 percent, a cholesterol intake of no more than 100 milligrams daily, and routine consumption of whole grains instead of refined grains.

USDA should also cater to the needs of people on special diets -- such as vegetarians or people who wish to eat very-low-fat diets -- and provide them with responsible information. USDA should up-date its nutrition information and also provide information in new formats, such as videos, radio and TV announcements, and even billboards.

USDA's food triangle is one important educational vehicle that needs to be expanded upon. The triangle is fine for young children, but it is rather simplistic for older, more sophisticated people. For instance, fatty ice cream and skim milk are grouped together in the dairy group; fatty pot roast and fat-free lentils are in the meat-and-protein group. At the very least, USDA ought to develop a true pyramid that divides the foods in each food group into "anytime," "sometimes," and "seldom" categories based on the food's content of fat, saturated fat, sodium, and other nutrients. Thus, lentils and skim milk would be anytime foods; chicken drumstick with skin and 2% lowfat milk would be "sometimes" foods; and pot roast and ice cream would be in the "seldom" category.

USDA's Nutrition Research and Education Service has a mission to improve the diets of all Americans, but a 1993 budget of only $1.2 million for nutrition education. If USDA is to remain the lead agency for nutrition education, it must seek funding at a far higher level, in line with the challenges before it.

USDA should also not be facilitating educational campaigns that undermine good nutrition. Currently, USDA helps the beef, dairy, pork, and egg industries promote their products by means of research and promotion boards. If you ask most nutritionists, or look at USDA's food triangle, it's perfectly obvious that Americans should be eating less of those foods, not more. And some of the ad campaigns are even inconsistent with USDA and FDA's labeling rules for nutrition claims. For instance, the pork industry has advertised that pork has less fat, calories, and cholesterol than the same size piece of chicken, but the ads compare one of the leanest cuts of pork to a medium-fat piece of chicken. The National Dairy Board advertises that the vitamin A in milk keeps skin smooth, the calcium builds strong bones, and the protein builds muscle -- even though

whole milk is loaded with saturated fat and cholesterol, which promote heart disease. USDA should dissociate itself from programs that encourage the consumption of disease-promoting foods.

Finally, USDA should make sure that deceptive advertising does not undermine restrictions on health and nutrition claims in food labeling. Currently, companies can make claims in advertising that they are not permitted to make on labels. USDA should urge the Federal Trade Commission to issue regulations on food advertising that are fully consistent with FDA and USDA's labeling rules regarding health and nutrition claims.

B. Educating Food-Stamp Recipients

USDA also has an opportunity to educate the 27 million Americans who participate in the food-stamp program. Unfortunately, it's largely a missed opportunity. Only one seventieth of one percent (0.015%) of the food-stamp budget goes toward food education.

Funding for a major educational campaign aimed at food-stamp recipients could come from the money that food retailers and USDA will save as the EBT, or Electronic Benefits Transfer system, is phased in in the next few years. EBT is expected to save retailers about $135 million and USDA about $27 million each year. Devoting half of those savings to a comprehensive educational program -- using the mass media and other social-marketing approaches -- could really help low-income Americans make the best use of their food-stamp dollars. The funding mechanism would call on retailers to designate one-third of one percent of their food-stamp sales to the educational fund. I don't think that's asking too much of an industry that benefits greatly from the food stamp program. After all, food stamps are a form of currency -- $21 billion worth in 1992, and $215 billion (inflation-adjusted) since 1980 -- that can only be spent in food stores.

C. Nutrition Education and Training Program

To improve the foods and the educational programs in schools, the Nutrition Education and Training Program -- or NET -- should be strengthened. The program is an excellent way of educating both kids and food-service workers. USDA should ask Congress for $35 million (the funding level in 1980, adjusted for inflation) for NET. Although the NET program is currently authorized at $25 million, less than half that amount has been appropriated.

D. National School Lunch Program

In addition to mounting educational programs, USDA's food and feeding programs provide a more direct means for improving diets. One such program is the National School Lunch Program, which feeds some 25 million children daily. Kids ought to be encouraged to eat a diet that promotes health and that teaches eating habits that

will last a lifetime. USDA surveys, however, indicate that school lunches are far too high in fat and sodium. The average meal gets 38 percent of its calories from fat -- compared to the recommended 30 percent -- and half again more than the recommended level of saturated fat. In other words, schools actually provide diets that are bad for children's health.

USDA should set quantitative standards for the fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, fiber, and sodium content of school lunches and breakfasts. Those standards should be based on "Dietary Guidelines for Americans" and other authoritative recommendations issued by government and the National Academy of Sciences.

So-called "competitive" foods should be held to similar nutritional standards as school lunches. The Department should require that every food sold at snack bars, vending machines, and other means in schools meets standards for fat, saturated fat, and other nutrients. Furthermore, to help schools serve more nutritious meals, USDA should require vendors to provide nutrition information on all products sold to schools. Ideally, all of those improvements would be in place for the beginning of the 1994-95 school year so as to spare children yet another year of unhealthy meals.

E. USDA Commodities

Ironically, some federally-subsidized food commodities are an impediment to offering wholesome school lunches. In 1992, $675 million in commodities was donated to school lunch and breakfast programs. Those commodities -- in the form of processed cheese, frozen or canned meats, canned fruits and vegetables, oils, butter, flour, and other staples -- represent one fifth of each school meal.

Many commodities are high in fat. We have calculated that half the calories of all commodities come from fat. That's far more than the dietary goal of 30 percent. For example, even among vegetable commodities, a fatty potato product similar to Tater Tots tops donations. That bite-sized product gets 42 percent of its calories from fat, whereas a baked potato has less than 1 percent calories from fat. To add insult to injury, USDA recommends they be served "with melted cheese or gravy." USDA should revise its food purchasing practices and offer schools a more healthful mix of commodities.

Fatty commodities are also a problem for Native American communities. Last year, more than 40,000 Native American households received commodities on a monthly basis. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, over half of those households included at least one adult with nutrition-related health problems. Those high rates of diabetes and heart disease indicate a need for lower-fat commodities.

F. Making Food Safer

While nutrition is the biggest problem related to the food we eat, it is essential that that food be grown and processed in ways that are as safe as possible for farmers, consumers, and the environment. It has been heartening to see USDA develop plans

with the FDA and the EPA to reduce farmers' dependency on pesticides. While pesticides sometimes provide valuable protection against insects, microorganisms, and weeds, they all too often endanger wildlife and farmers, despoil the land and water, and add modestly to the risk of cancer for consumers. Thousands of farmers are finding that they can greatly reduce, or even eliminate, the use of potentially toxic pesticides. While doing so requires sophisticated management skills, farmers are often rewarded with safer working conditions and premium prices at the market place. I hope that USDA will expand its efforts to support organic and sustainable agriculture. Such efforts could involve a range of strategies:

* first would be to finalize the regulations defining the term "organic," as required in the 1990 Farm Bill. A national definition would pave the way for major growers and processors to increase the value of their products by growing or using organic foods.

* Next, USDA, together with states, should actively encourage farmers to adopt organic or sustainable methods. Ideally, the government would provide a financial safety net to assure farmers that they won't go broke as they reduce their use of chemicals. Simultaneously, USDA should highlight to farmers and consumers the advantages of organically grown food to themselves and the environment.

* USDA should encourage states to boost taxes on pesticides and fertilizer and earmark those revenues to mount vigorous campaigns to reduce agri-chemical use and repair the harm they have caused.

Finally, USDA needs to work closely with industry and consumer groups to solve the problem of foodborne illness. Almost ten thousand people die every year from food poisoning. That's a toll we should no longer tolerate. While food poisoning may never be completely vanquished, USDA -- in cooperation with FDA -- could move aggressively to improve the way poultry and cattle are grown and slaughtered. While some have advocated food irradiation as the solution, I think that other approaches make more sense and would be more acceptable to consumers. Livestock feed should not contain pathogens. Poultry, hog, and cattle growers need to clean up their operations. Slaughterhouses must be cleaned up, and sick animals must be kept from healthy ones. Treating carcasses with inexpensive, innocuous chemicals like trisodium phosphate and acetic acid should be used to reduce bacterial loads. Finally, consumers need to be educated, and handling and cooking information needs to be put on labels of all foods that pose a risk of food poisoning, including poultry, red meat, and eggs.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by reiterating that the public expects USDA -- a sleeping giant when it comes to food safety and nutrition -- to use its tremendous power to improve the nation's diet and, thus, their health in the coming years. Come 1996, the public should evaluate USDA's performance on the basis of the effectiveness and visibility of USDA's educational programs, improvements in school meals, changes in the commodities

program, and a significant reduction in food poisoning. I look forward to great accomplishments from Secretary Espy's fine team.