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Message under Revision: USDA Speaks About Beef, Pork, Cheese, and Obesity

Parke Wilde

The following messages for food consumers have something important in common:

- “Beef. It’s what’s for dinner.”
- “Pork. The other white meat.”
- “Ahh, the power of cheese.”
- “Choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and moderate in total fat.”

The slogans are not equally catchy. Not equally expensive to produce. Not equally beloved by nutrition educators. The common theme is that the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has supported each of these messages, but each message may disappear in the coming year.

For the first three messages, the challenge comes from dissident farmers who have sued the messages’ sponsors in the beef, pork, and dairy industries. These sponsors, known as “checkoff boards,” collect several hundred million dollars each year in mandatory payments from producers to support advertising and promotions (Figure 1). Some farmers have objected to the taxes and the marketing messages. In three separate cases, federal courts have declared that checkoff boards violate the First Amendment rights of these farmers by forcing them to pay for marketing messages with which they disagree. The US Supreme Court has agreed to hear the beef case this season. The Court’s decision will also decide the fate of the pork and dairy checkoff boards.

For the fourth message, the challenge comes from an expert panel that has recommended major changes in the federal government’s *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. The *Guidelines* are the centerpiece of federal efforts to combat obesity and poor nutrition. They provide the basis for the Food Guide Pyramid and the nutrition requirements for

the National School Lunch Program. Every five years, the US Department of Agriculture asks an expert panel for advice on revising the *Guidelines* (Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, 2004). In August 2004, the panel recommended replacing the fourth message above with more general advice, “Choose fats wisely for good health” (Table 1). The USDA will review the panel’s report and release the new guidelines in 2005.

The checkoff controversy and the *Dietary Guidelines* controversy have become connected. On behalf of the Secretary of Agriculture and the USDA, the federal government’s lawyers recently told the Supreme Court that dissident farmers are not being forced to speak out against their will. Rather, the government is taxing the farmers to

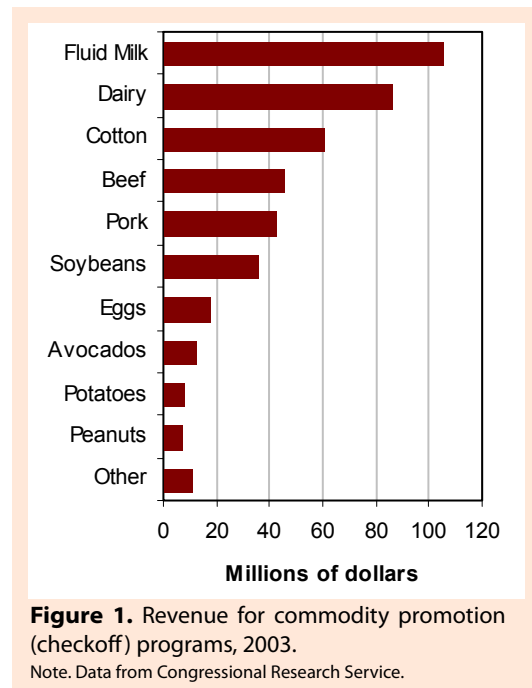


Table 1. The Dietary Guidelines in 2000 and the expert panel's recommendations for 2005.

USDA's Dietary Guidelines (2000)	Expert panel recommendations for USDA's Dietary Guidelines (2005)
Aim for a healthy weight.	Control calorie intake to manage body weight.
Be physically active each day.	Be physically active every day.
Let the Pyramid guide your food choices.	[No corresponding recommendation].
Choose a variety of grains daily, especially whole grains.	Consume a variety of foods within and among the basic food groups while staying within energy needs.
Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables daily.	Increase daily intake of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and nonfat or low-fat milk and milk products.
Keep food safe to eat.	Keep food safe to eat.
Choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and moderate in total fat.	Choose fats wisely for good health.
Choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugars.	Choose carbohydrates wisely for good health.
Choose and prepare foods with less salt.	Choose and prepare foods with little salt.
If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.	If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.

support the government's own message. According to the government's lawyers, the advertisements are "government speech," because Congress specified the message and USDA officials control the boards (Bryson et al., 2004).

This reasoning overturns the usual view of the checkoff programs as private organizations sponsored by farmers for their own benefit. It places the USDA in the perhaps absurd position of standing by all of these messages at once: Eat more beef, more pork, more cheese, *and* choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol. One could go on: ...*and* eat more potatoes, eggs, and soybeans, and still "aim for a healthy weight." Not surprisingly, these seemingly mixed messages have come under some questioning.

Commodity Promotion Programs Under Scrutiny

In studies of a single checkoff program, agricultural economists often measure a small but positive benefit for farmers. However, the programs appear less successful when they are studied as a group. For

example, in a recent report to Congress, the USDA described independent research showing that dairy consumption would have averaged 2% lower without the advertising (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, 2004). But in a special issue of the journal *Agribusiness* last year, economists found that beef advertising reduced sales of pork, while pork advertising reduced sales of beef (Boetel & Liu, 2003).

Other economists in the same issue said these "beggar-thy-neighbor" effects of promotion cause one group of farmers to profit at another group's expense, giving rise to "excessive promotion from the national viewpoint" (Alston, Freebairn, & James, 2003). The economists worried that beef advertising could hurt poultry sales. This is no idle concern, judging by the Beef Board's recent print ads disparaging chicken (Figure 2).

A study by Cornell University economists in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* this year found that the effectiveness of milk advertising may have peaked in the early 1990s and declined since then. The effectiveness of cheese advertising grew steadily over time, but it was held back somewhat by higher levels of food away from home (Schmit & Kaiser, 2004). The authors suggested that to get more bang for their dollar, dairy producers might want to change their cheese advertising to focus more on the restaurant segment.

To some extent, the dairy checkoff program has been following such a strategy. According to the USDA's report to Congress, the dairy program "worked closely with top national restaurant chains, including Pizza Hut and Wendy's, to drive cheese volume and ensure that cheese was featured prominently in menu items." The Wendy's partnership supported the Wild Mountain Bacon Cheeseburger, a sandwich with 640 calories, more than half of which come from fat. The other checkoff boards also use this approach. The National Pork Board helped McDonald's expand its marketing for a Breaded Pork Sandwich.

Even if nutrition were not an issue, the economic research would raise doubts that checkoff programs help the farm community as a whole. And, of course, nutrition *is* an issue. Taking ownership of all the boards' consumer messages would complicate the USDA's desire to speak with one voice about nutrition.

Dietary Guidelines to Be Revised

“The *Dietary Guidelines*... serve as the vehicle for the Federal government to speak with ‘one voice’ on nutrition issues for the health of the American public,” Eric Hentges told a Congressional hearing in September, 2003. Hentges was Vice President of Applied Technology and Education Services for the National Pork Board until February, 2003, when he became head of the USDA’s Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. In his new capacity, he will oversee the revision of the *Dietary Guidelines* and the Food Guide Pyramid in the coming year.

It will not be an easy task. Whatever Hentges’ hopes for the output, the input to this very public revision process has many voices. At a USDA meeting this August about the Food Guide Pyramid, vegetarians proposed, “Limit or avoid foods of animal origin.” The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association described meat as “a fundamental building block in food guidance.” The representative from Atkins Nutritionals said that railing against the “evils of fat” does little good. He proposed a revised Pyramid that emphasizes the benefits of protein and the principles of “carbohydrate awareness.” The scientist and antifat advocate Dean Ornish recalled a previous argument with the late Dr. Atkins in the same USDA auditorium, but said that both he and Atkins agreed on the dangers of simple carbohydrates (as in sugars and refined grains). The rice industry speaker noted the many earlier comments in favor of whole grains over other grains and said, “We strongly disagree with this direction.”

Seeking to stay above the fray, the expert panel on the *Dietary Guidelines* focused its recent report strictly on the scientific evidence. But, even here, the report’s small print could make it hard for the USDA to keep its constituents in the nutrition community and the commodity promotion boards equally happy.

Take fats and cholesterol, as perhaps the most important example. Cholesterol is complicated, because it comes in “good” and “bad” varieties. Also, “dietary” cholesterol in food does not translate directly into “serum” cholesterol in our blood. Still, the expert panel concluded that the effect of dietary cholesterol on “bad” serum cholesterol is “direct and progressive,” increasing the risk of coronary heart disease. The panel said people should

www.BeefItsWhatsForDinner.com

LEAN BEEF'S ACTUALLY LOWER IN FAT THAN YOU THINK.
MAKES YOU WONDER ABOUT EATING ALL THAT
SKINLESS CHICKEN, DOESN'T IT?

THE FACT IS, LEAN BEEF HAS ONLY ONE MORE GRAM OF SATURATED FAT THAN A SKINLESS CHICKEN BREAST... AND SIX TIMES MORE ZINC, THREE TIMES MORE IRON AND EIGHT TIMES MORE VITAMIN B12. SO YOU CAN EAT HEALTHY, AND IT DOESN'T TASTE LIKE IT.

BASED ON USDA DATA USING THE AVERAGE OF 3 OZ. COOKED SERVINGS OF EYE ROUND ROAST, TOP ROUND STEAK, TOP SIRLOIN STEAK, BONELESS SHOULDER POT ROAST, ROUND TIP ROAST AND SHOULDER STEAK COMPARED TO 3 OZ. COOKED SERVING OF BONELESS, SKINLESS CHICKEN BREAST. FUNDED BY AMERICA'S BEEF PRODUCERS.

Figure 2.

consume as little dietary cholesterol as possible within an otherwise adequate diet. All of our dietary cholesterol comes from meat, dairy, and eggs—commodities that together account for most checkoff advertising.

The amount and type of fat we eat is even more important for our health than our intake of dietary cholesterol is. The expert panel continues to advise large reductions in the average consumption of saturated fat. The relationship between saturated fat and “bad” cholesterol is again “direct and progressive,” increasing the risk of heart disease. About half of the saturated fat in our food supply comes from meat and dairy products, excluding butter. If butter were counted, the fraction would be higher still.

In addition to saturated fats and cholesterol, the panel recommended that Americans reduce their consumption of *trans* fat, whose effect on “bad” cholesterol and heart disease is—you guessed it—“direct and progressive.” These *trans* fats come mainly from baked goods and hard margarine, and to a smaller extent from animal products. At the same time, because fish contain special healthy fats,

the committee recommended Americans consume more fish than we currently do.

Obesity was a central issue for the *Dietary Guidelines* expert panel. Its report suggested replacing the current guideline, “Aim for a healthy weight,” with the more specific advice, “Control calorie intake to manage body weight.” Exercising is also important, but not sufficient without controlling calorie intake.

The expert panel fiercely criticized low-carb, high-fat diets. It said they are high in saturated fat and cholesterol, low in fiber, result in low intake of fruits and vegetables, and have not been evaluated over the long term. If the *Dietary Guidelines* is the federal government’s “one voice” on nutrition, it is hard to imagine that voice endorsing the motto on the National Pork Board’s website: “Counting Carbs? Pork’s Perfect.”

Putting it Together

The growing complexity of scientific evidence on diet and health may explain the expert panel’s recommendation to replace the current guideline about saturated fat and cholesterol with the more general proposed guideline, “Choose fats wisely for good health.” On a superficial level, such a general guideline could reduce political conflict about the USDA’s nutrition advice. Who could object to choosing “wisely”?

A guideline’s ability to avoid giving offense could prove increasingly important. Ironically, the only way USDA-supported commodity promotion programs can survive will be if the US Supreme Court accepts the idea that the commodity promotions represent the USDA’s own “government speech.” Hentges and his agency have committed to the principle that government speech on food and nutrition should have “one voice.” If the USDA’s one voice asks Americans to consume more beef, pork, cheese, and “choose fats wisely,” only a careful listener may think that the chord still sounds a bit out of tune.

In part to avoid the political hazards of criticizing specific foods, the USDA has long adhered to a principle of nutrition education, which states that there are no “good foods” or “bad foods.” Almost any food can fit into a healthy diet, so long as it is properly balanced by other healthy food decisions. But this principle can be stretched only so far. The

challenge is to limit unhealthy fats and control calories overall. Just as the economic benefits of checkoff programs look weaker when one considers the programs as a group, the nutrition concerns escalate when one evaluates the checkoff advertising as a whole.

Taken as a whole, the checkoff advertising defies the *Dietary Guidelines*. It would be inconsistent for the USDA to promote increased intake of all the major meat and dairy categories, yet still advise Americans to “choose fats wisely.” It would be untenable to acknowledge all of the commodity promotions as the USDA’s own message, yet still support a new guideline to “control calorie intake to manage body weight.” Sooner or later—and the coming year is a good bet—something has to give.

For More Information

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