

## Dietary Guidelines Revisions Offer “Unprecedented” Sustainability Opportunity

Potential revisions to U.S. dietary guidelines could encourage Americans to eat in a way that is both healthier and more environmentally sustainable. Health experts and green advocates applaud the possible move, but not everyone shares their enthusiasm.



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September 29, 2014

WASHINGTON — For the first time, the federal committee that oversees the official Dietary Guidelines for Americans is explicitly considering issues of sustainability while drafting new recommendations. Public health and environmental advocates say this constitutes both a significant change and opportunity, so long as any reforms roll back the centrality the guidelines have long given to the consumption of meat and dairy products.

The Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, made up of a rotating mix of a dozen external experts in nutrition, public health and related fields, is tasked with revising the country’s formal recommendations around diet once every five years. The guidelines inform a broad array of federal programming, from the infamous “food pyramid” to the food assistance given to low-income mothers to the menus offered to soldiers, schoolkids and prisoners in federal facilities.

Yet the Dietary Guidelines have long been pilloried by health experts as detrimental for a variety of health concerns. Green groups have likewise criticized the recommendations as contributing to environmentally harmful agricultural practices. However, both interests are now finding common cause around a unique new focus by the current Advisory Committee on issues of sustainability.

According to a spokesperson with the Department of Health and Human Services, the sustainability focus for the 2015 revisions came directly from the new members of the Advisory Committee.

“The Federal government sets the official Charter of the Committee that describes the scope and objectives of advice sought by the government,” the spokesperson told MintPress in an email. “However, the Committee determines the topics for which new scientific evidence is available that could potentially inform the development of future Dietary Guidelines for Americans by the Federal government. Sustainability is one of these areas for the 2015 [committee].”

Earlier this year, the Advisory Committee began collecting public comments on the issue of sustainability, which it listed as one of two “key topic areas.” In explaining what type of comments it was looking for, the committee requested public and private sector views on “a targeted topic on food system sustainability ... addressing local, regional, national, or international scales. Specifically, it seeks approaches and current examples of sustainability in the food system.”

Last week, the committee held its final public meeting before draft recommendations are expected over the winter, and a wide spectrum

of groups have been offering recommendations on how the Advisory Committee should use – or ignore – its sustainability mandate.

“Diet is one part of a larger system of environmental, social and economic sustainability. The guidelines have the power to inform Americans of how their food choices impact food security and environmental sustainability for future generations,” the American Public Health Association, an advocacy group with members from across the public health sector, said in formal comments to the Advisory Committee.

In particular, the association urged the committee to “Emphasize the variety of foods that provide protein and calcium,” noting that the agricultural production of animal-based protein uses some 70 percent of global cultivable land and produces almost a fifth of all greenhouse gas emissions.

“The guidelines can advance acceptance of plant-based diets by using language and graphics that emphasize alternative protein sources,” the association states, “and providing consumers with more explicit guidance on how to adopt plant-based diets.”

### **USDA promotion**

Even if the Dietary Guidelines for Americans play only a small role in the day-to-day lives of most individuals, they continue to wield significant influence as the federal government’s official recommendations on diet and nutrition. For this reason, they have long been the focus of particular concern by advocacy groups, particularly from health advocates.

For critics, much of the problem can be traced back to the guidelines’ joint oversight by two federal agencies, the HHS and the Department

of Agriculture. The latter comes in for special scrutiny, given its mandate to promote agricultural interests that, traditionally, have been resistant to health- and sustainability-related regulation.

While USDA took the lead on the last revisions, in 2010, HHS is taking the lead this time around, sparking optimism among some.

“The Advisory Committee’s new focus on sustainability is a truly unprecedented mandate and one that, in some important ways, is out of sync with broader USDA policy,” Kari Hamerschlag, a senior program manager at Friends of the Earth, an advocacy group, told MintPress.

“Many USDA food and farm policies encourage meat-centric diets, including the significant subsidies given to the corn and soy fed to these animals. Meanwhile, there’s very little in the USDA budget to promote fruits and vegetables.”

According to estimates provided by Friends of the Earth, the production of lentils requires some 65 percent less water than beef, while emitting 30 times less greenhouse gasses. Such gains are over and above the growing body of research on the detrimental impacts to human health of consuming large quantities of red and processed meats, in particular.

Yet Hamerschlag pointed to USDA commodity promotion programs (known as “checkoff” initiatives) that see the federal government helping to increase consumer purchasing of a range of items. There are currently 22 checkoff programs, pushing items such as beef, pork, eggs and dairy products (as well as blueberries, watermelons and Christmas trees).

“These programs are great for industry profits, increasing meat and dairy sales by several billion dollars a year,” Hamerschlag said.

“But if the Advisory Committee is going to be serious in any way about this new sustainability focus, it’s going to have to look at ways to include recommendations around reducing the consumption of these products.”

In fact, the 2010 Dietary Guidelines do begin to promote a plant-based diet. Yet they do so only subtly and, confusingly, they simultaneously continue to promote the significant consumption of animal proteins.

Indeed, a study released earlier this month by researchers at the University of Michigan found that Americans, who already consume very high levels of meat, were actually under-consuming animal proteins according to the federal recommendations.

“[I]f Americans adopted the recommendations in [the 2010 Dietary Guidelines] while keeping caloric intake constant, diet-related greenhouse gas emissions would increase 12 percent,” the study found, according to a Sept. 5 release from the university. Meanwhile, “a switch to diets that don’t contain animal products would lead to the biggest reductions in this country’s diet-related greenhouse emissions.”

### **Risking irrelevance**

Such findings have clearly worried certain industry interests, particularly against the backdrop of broader consumer trends in favor of healthier and more sustainable eating (including lower consumption of red meat) and, now, potential government action around diet and environmental concerns. In formal comments to the Advisory Committee, for instance,

multiple agriculture lobby groups have called into question the committee's expertise on the issue.

The committee "is comprised of experts in nutrition and epidemiology. To address the variety of issues attendant to sustainability is outside the Committee's expertise," the American Meat Institute, which represents producers, said in comments. (The institute failed to respond to request for comment for this story.)

"Sustainability is a complex issue that is being addressed by various experts in a number of other forums," the AMI continued. "Until those expert panels have drawn more concrete conclusions it would be premature for the Committee to incorporate such considerations into its dietary guidance recommendations."

In fact, the new Dietary Guidelines reforms have become something of a touchstone issue in conservative circles in recent months, factoring into broader social debates. "Meet the Radicals Creating the New Federal Dietary Guidelines," read a headline in the conservative Washington Free Beacon earlier this year, with a subtitle noting, "Environmentalism creeps into food policy."

Another analysis, from the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity, a conservative watchdog group, warned, "Americans can't afford agenda-driven dietary guidelines."

Supporters of the Advisory Committee's new sustainability mandate acknowledge that the process is seeing some significant pushback. Observers suggest that lobbying efforts will not necessarily derail the committee's focus

on sustainability, but they worry that such efforts could push it to adopt a watered-down approach to the issue.

"There are definitely some pitfalls here. In addition to lobbying efforts, there are many ways to define sustainability," Stephanie Feldstein, the director of population and sustainability at the Center for Biological Diversity, a watchdog group, told MintPress.

"For instance, if the committee chooses to advocate for local or organic meat production but for no overall decline in the consumption of animal protein, they'll be able to say they've taken sustainability measures – but they won't actually be sustainable."

Still, Feldstein pointed to growing public trends in favor of healthier, local or organic food systems, and suggested that failure to take into account this strengthening interest would risk further alienating a spectrum of consumers from federal recommendations.

"This is a real opportunity to change the narrative around nutrition in this country, formally acknowledging an issue that consumers have been interested in for years," she said.

"The committee can't just ignore the growing views on sustainability among consumers. If they don't take these into account, they'll be seriously risking irrelevance."

The Advisory Committee's draft revisions are expected this winter. After a public comment period and additional consolidation, the 2015 Dietary Guidelines should be released late next year.