

## Meat industry has a cow over US dietary guidelines



The dietary guidelines are up for grabs, and everyone wants to weigh in. Photograph: Kent Lacin LLC/The Food Passionates/Corbis

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### **The US meat industry is fighting a call for more plant-based diets and a potential government policy shift on dietary guidelines**

A nationwide food fight is heating up after the US government accepted final public comments this month on a scientific advisory report recommending Americans reduce their meat consumption for the sake of healthier and more environmentally sustainable diets. The meat industry is fighting back against those who want healthier guidelines, and this battle looks like it could go the distance.

Written by a panel of medical, public health and nutrition experts, the 571-page report provides the scientific basis for the government's dietary guidelines for Americans, a highly influential policy document updated every five years that informs federal nutrition policy and food assistance programs, as well as associated educational and marketing efforts.

Since Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Burwell and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack released the report for public comment in February, the response has been overwhelming, ranging from intense opposition by meat producers and their allies to widespread support among

health advocates and environmental groups. Their starkly contrasting views are reflected in numerous campaigns, dozens of public testimonies and nearly 30,000 comments filed with the government by its 8 May deadline. That compares with only 1,200 comments on the last report in 2010, authored by a separately appointed panel.

This year's surge is the result of the 2015 advisory committee's first-time recommendation for reduced meat consumption, coupled with its consideration of environmental impacts – also a first. The report specifically advises consumers to eat less red and processed meat, in addition to less overall saturated fat, salt, sugary foods and beverages, and refined grains. It allows, however, that “lean meats can be part of a healthy dietary pattern” and Americans can achieve more environmentally sustainable diets “without excluding any food groups”.

The health and agriculture departments will weigh the report's recommendation against comments from industry and the public before issuing a revised policy document, tentatively scheduled for release this fall.

Miriam Nelson, a Tufts University professor who headed the independent advisory panel's subcommittee on food sustainability and safety, says she is encouraged by the overall public reaction.

“The public comment is great, regardless of what side you are on,” Nelson says. But, she adds, addressing some of the report's opponents, “Don't attack scientists and deflect what the actual research is saying.”

There is some evidence of such deflection and attacks by both industry and political forces.

In a letter to Secretaries Burwell and Vilsack, 30 US senators – including 29 Republicans and one Independent – expressed concern over the scientific integrity of the committee's recommendation to “remove ‘lean meat’ from the statement of a healthy dietary pattern”.

But the report didn't do that. As Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said in written testimony: “The senators could not have read the 571-page report very carefully. In fact they must not have read much past page three, since page four clearly states that ‘lean meats can be a part of a healthy dietary pattern’.” This last part appears in a footnote. Jacobson said that because they found evidence that diets high in red and processed meats are linked to increased heart disease and some cancers, “the expert panel sensibly recommends eating less of those foods”.

Health advocacy groups, including the American Heart Association and the

American Institute for Cancer Research, have come out in support of the recommendations.

### **‘Hands off my hotdog’**

In March, the North American Meat Institute launched an online petition that refers to the advisory committee members as “elite academics” and “nutrition despots who seek to impose their personal choices on others”.

The petition, called “Hands off my Hot Dog”, asks Burwell and Vilsack “to reject these extreme and ill-considered recommendations”. It also accuses the committee of “wandering into environmental issues”, as opposed to focusing on health and nutrition. USDA could take the environment into account in its next dietary guidelines

Nelson counters that the majority of the report is focused on nutrition and sustainability is treated only in the context of food security. “Food security has been a long term focus of the dietary guidelines since 1980. You can’t focus on food security if you don’t also focus on and consider sustainable diets.”

With fewer than 2,500 supporters as of 12 May, the meat industry petition has little backing compared to a petition in favor of the report’s recommendations for less meat and more plant-based diets.

Led by environmental groups Friends of the Earth and the Center for Biological Diversity, that petition – delivered to US Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services on 8 May – included 150,000 signatures.

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Eric Mittenthal, a spokesman for the North American Meat Institute, defended the trade association’s petition and its opposition to the committee’s dietary advice: “Our point has never been that sustainability is irrelevant, it’s that recommendations on sustainability should come from experts on sustainability.”

The trade group’s 8 May comments to the government say that because of a lack of expertise in some areas, “many of the recommendations lack the scientific rigor to be utilized in developing the final policy document”.

Michele Simon, a California-based public health lawyer, says the industry’s comments sound familiar. In a recent editorial, Simon said meat makers’ strategy – “honed by the tobacco industry decades ago” – is to sow doubt in order to maintain the status quo.

“Similar to the tobacco industry, a lot of their tactics, especially early on, tried to discredit scientists, confuse the issues and confuse what we were saying,” Nelson said.