CLIMATE PROGRESS

For The First Time, The Government Might Officially Link Diet To The Environment

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This year, the federal government could advise Americans to consider the environment when deciding what they should make for dinner — a prospect that's already drawn the ire of the meat industry.

We all remember the Food Pyramid. Well, now it's officially been re-purposed into MyPlate, but the gist is still the same — to provide people guidelines for a healthy, balanced diet. In February, the advisory committee responsible for coming up with recommendations for the federal government's dietary guidelines — a document that supplements MyPlate, providing more detail on healthy diets — included environmental sustainability in its report. That means that, for the first time, the federal government might include sustainability in its official dietary guidelines, which are set to be released this fall.

"A diet higher in plant-based foods, such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds, and lower in calories and animal-based foods is more health promoting and is associated with less environmental impact than is the current U.S. diet," the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) report states. It continues: "Current evidence shows that the average U.S. diet has a larger environmental impact in terms of increased greenhouse gas emissions, land use, water use, and energy use, compared to the above dietary patterns."

This is a big deal for environmentalists and others concerned about climate change, because agriculture — especially meat production — is a major source of the carbon dioxide emissions that drive climate change. Since the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, which are responsible for putting together the U.S. Dietary Guidelines every five years, use the DGAC's report when determining what will go into the guidelines, sustainability might make it into the official guidelines. But the USDA and HHS aren't explicitly required to include all the points from the report in their guidelines, and the meat industry has made no secret of its opposition to the proposed change. So now the question remains: will the government formally acknowledge environmental impact in its updated dietary guidelines, or will it leave the data out — a move the meat industry is pushing hard for?

A Common-Sense Move?

Even before the DGAC released its official report, the meat industry went on the defensive, responding to the committee's discussion of sustainability during the meetings it held

while crafting the report. During one of the DGAC's meetings, the panel presented a slide that said that a diet "higher in plant-based foods…and lower in animal-based foods is more health-promoting and is associated with lesser environmental impact" than an average American's diet.

The North American Meat Institute (NAMI) issued a statement lambasting the committee's discussion. NAMI said that it "questions the scientific rigor of the DGAC decision" and that the recommendation ignored lean meat's role in a healthy diet.

"Meat and poultry are an integral part of the American diet and the DGAC's failure to recognize the role of lean meat as a component of a healthy eating pattern is concerning and ill considered," NAMI stated. "It also reflects either an astonishing lack of awareness of the scientific evidence or a callous disregard of that evidence, again calling into question the entirety of the recommendations submitted by the DGAC to the agencies."

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association's president Philip Ellis issued a statement last week, saying that "the topic of sustainability is outside the scope of the Dietary Guidelines and we urge the Secretaries to reject any recommendations beyond health and nutrition."

Still, as forceful as the meat industry's response has been, environmental and health groups have also shown strong support for the inclusion of sustainability in the DGAC report. The committee notes that its findings on diet and sustainability do not mean that Americans need to cut out any one food group in order to lessen the environmental impact of their diets.

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The guidelines serve as general rules for a healthy diet and, to some extent, lifestyle, and are the basis for the federal government's MyPlate, which replaced the Food Pyramid as a nutrition guide in 2011. But beyond being a blueprint for regular Americans, they also influence the food choices in federal prisons, hospitals, and schools. That's much of the reason why proponents want to see sustainability in the guidelines: it could make a difference in emissions if all of these institutions invested in more plant-based food and a little less meat.

"I think it's quite important to recognize that our diets make a difference to the planet, and make a difference to long term sustainability of our agricultural system, as well as to our health in the long run," Doug Boucher, director of climate research and analysis at the Union of Concerned Scientists, told ThinkProgress. "I think it's an important step forward."

But a meat industry argument — that the committee is stepping out of the typical bounds of nutrition by including points on environmental sustainability in its recommendations — is one that some, including former Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, say could cause the USDA and HHS to refrain from including sustainability recommendations in its fall guidelines.

Glickman, who now serves as executive director of the Aspen Institute's Congressional Program, told ThinkProgress that he was wary of the idea of including something like sustainability in the guidelines, even though he knows the importance of sustainable food.

"I think the dietary guidelines are largely health guidelines, and I think when we put too many things extraneous to health in those guidelines, it dilutes them, it diffuses them, it makes them less impactful, because the guidelines are really followed all over the country," he told ThinkProgress.

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack has hinted that he might feel similarly to Glickman about including sustainability in the guidelines. In February, Vilsack said that the DGAC scientists who created the report "have freedom. They are like my 3-year-old granddaughter. She does not have to color inside the lines."

"I am going to color inside the lines," Vilsack continued.

Vilsack expanded on his statement in a March interview with the Wall Street Journal.

"I read the actual law," he said. "And what I read …was that our job ultimately is to formulate dietary and nutrition guidelines. And I emphasize dietary and nutrition because that's what the law says. I think it's my responsibility to follow the law."

For Glickman, the concern goes beyond the question of whether or not environmental issues are outside the scope of the guidelines, however. If the USDA and HHS include sustainability in the dietary guidelines, they could end up taking attention away from other health-related issues, he said.

"I just think to the average consumer out there, the more information you give them in the guideline area, the less likely they're willing to adopt specific practices of what they actually eat," he said. "I view the guidelines as a basic health guide," he continued, "rather than a more generic guide on how to live totally holistically."

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The politicization of the sustainability issue — the attacks by the meat industry and Congress and the shows of support from environmental groups — have also made the sustainability section of the recommendations, which only totaled a few paragraphs out of a a report that was more than 500 pages, a part of the recommendations that overshadows other parts, Glickman said. In many ways, the sustainability section has become "the issue" in the discussion about the guidelines, he said, and that takes attention away from pressing health problems like obesity and diabetes.

But others don't buy the argument that including the sustainability tenet would qualify as overreach, or would dilute the guidelines' message. Parke Wilde, associate professor at Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, said that including mentions of sustainability in the guidelines seemed like common sense to him.

"Environmental issues raise many of the same scientific questions that nutrition issues do, so it seems reasonably well-matched to have them in the same report," he said. In other words, a diet higher in plants is good for the environment and for health, so it would make sense for the guidelines to let Americans know that. And, he said, other countries — such as Brazil — have already combined sustainability with and diet in their guidelines.

Wilde also said that he isn't surprised about the response that the report's treatment of sustainability is getting.

"I think if anything I'm surprised that the current Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee has been able to successfully steer so well clear of political pressure," he said. "I think the report was surprisingly strong."

A History Of Industry Pressure

But whether or not industry or political pressure will impact the federal agencies' decision to include mentions of sustainability remains to be seen. The USDA has dealt with pressure from the meat industry before, and in some cases, has ended up making decisions that support the industry's views. In 2012, the agency published an internal newsletter on its website that outlined what it was doing to become more environmentally-friendly, and included tips on how to lead a more sustainable lifestyle. One of those tips talked about the Meatless Monday campaign.

"One simple way to reduce your environmental impact while dining at our cafeterias is to participate in the 'Meatless Monday' initiative," the newsletter read. "This international effort, as the name implies, encourages people not to eat meat on Mondays… How will going meatless one day of the week help the environment? The production of meat, especially beef (and dairy as well), has a large environmental impact."

But, after outcry from the meat industry and a few members of Congress, the agency took down the memo, and clarified in a statement that it didn't endorse Meatless Mondays. "This was a chance for the U.S.D.A. to say, 'We support meat production and the production and consumption of meals without meat; we support all forms of agriculture, and we actually believe that if Americans ate a bit less meat both they and American agriculture would be healthier,'" New York Times food columnist Mark Bittman wrote in 2012. "Not a chance."

And according to Marion Nestle, New York University's Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, the federal government's recommendations on what and how much to eat have been influenced by the food industry before.

"More often than not, food industry pressures have succeeded in inducing government agencies to eliminate, weaken or thoroughly obfuscate recommendations to eat less of certain nutrients and their food sources," Nestle wrote in 2008. Nestle uses the 2005 dietary guidelines as an example. In 2005, the guidelines included recommendations on Americans'

physical activity that were more in depth than they had been in 2000. They zeroed in on physical activity, a focus that industries like the American Beverage Association advocated, rather than diet.

"Physical activity is critical for maintaining a healthy body weight, but the emphasis on such recommendations distracts attention from 'eat less' messages," Nestle wrote.

Still, Nestle told ThinkProgress in an email that the buildup around this year's dietary guidelines is noticeable in its scope.

"This is the first time that I am aware of when the DGAC report was so controversial that everyone will be waiting to see what USDA and HHS do and do not do with it," she said.

Nestle also said that she didn't think anything major had been included in the DGAC's report and not included in the actual guidelines — at least since 2005. That was the year that the DGAC report became a separate endeavor than the guidelines, something that was written by scientists to advise the USDA and HHS on what they should include in the guidelines. Before 2005, the DGAC wrote the guidelines.

The public comment period on the DGAC report ended May 8 — after being extended — so all stakeholders, not just the meat and dairy industry, had the chance to weigh in. Still, proponents of sustainability's inclusion in the guidelines are concerned. Stephanie Feldstein, population and sustainability director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said she thinks the meat and livestock industry has "famously had an outsized influence" on the government and on all other entities affected by its lobbying.

"It's one of the strongest lobbies in the country," she told ThinkProgress.

The Impacts Of What We Eat

This is the first time sustainability has been included in the DGAC's report. But it's not the first time the committee has brought up the issue of sustainability, said Miriam Nelson, professor of nutrition at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts and chair of the DGAC subcommittee that addressed sustainability. Nelson told ThinkProgress she and other members of the committee suggested in 2010 that the committee look into including sustainability in its report. She said she and the other committee members thought it was important to include sustainability in their discussions because food security had been a part of the guidelines since their inception.

"Food security…has been a topic area of focus of the dietary guidelines since the very beginning," she said. "A very important factor of food security is not just food security today but food security in the future."

If food security — and insecurity — continues to be part of the report, then including information on sustainable diets isn't outside the scope of the USDA and HHS, she said. Climate change is predicted to be a major factor in the world's future food security — intensifying droughts and increasingly unpredictable weather will make growing crops difficult in some parts of the world, and higher temperatures could also cause livestock to suffer from more frequent heat stress.

Boucher also said the idea that plants should be the basis of meals isn't new: the 2010 DGAC reportalso recommended that Ameri-

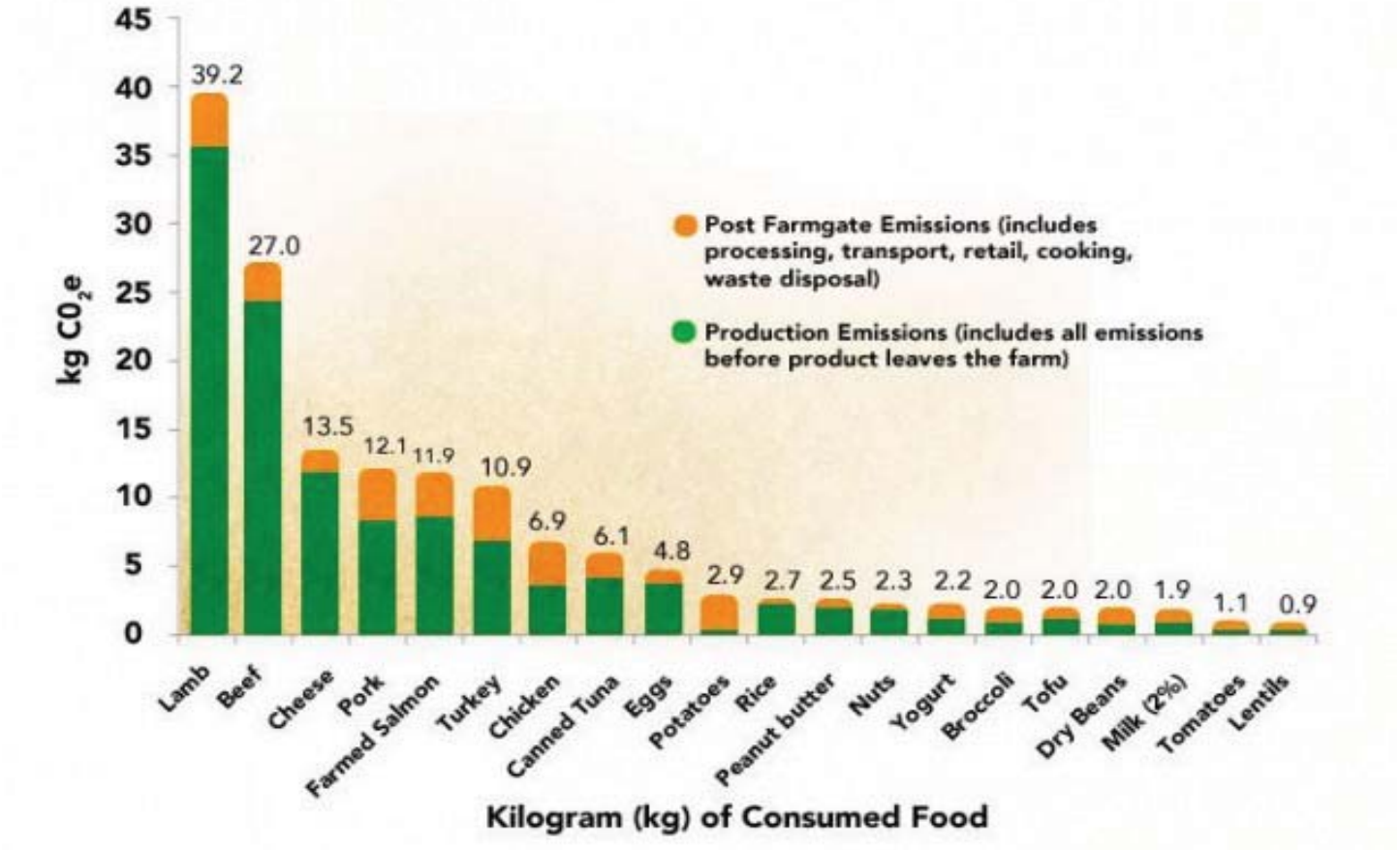
cans "shift food intake patterns to a more plant-based diet that emphasizes vegetables, cooked dry beans and peas, fruits, whole grains, nuts, and seeds."

Nelson said she had "no idea" whether the USDA and HHS will include the report's section on sustainability in the guidelines, but said that because a healthy diet and a sustainable diet are "one in the same," it would make sense if they did. And even if you take the sustainability aspect out of the report, the rest of the report still states that a diet high in plant-based foods is a healthy alternative to the average American's diet.

An HHS spokesperson said in a statement to ThinkProgress that the agency and the USDA "are in the process of developing the eighth edition of the Dietary Guidelines," but didn't talk about the sustainability aspect specifically.

Letting Americans know that a diet high in meat is associated with more carbon emissions than a diet high in plant-based foods could make a difference in terms of emissions. Science has shown that meat is a significant contributor to climate change. In 2014, a study found that cutting back on meat consumption can lead to significantly lower carbon footprints. Specifically, the study found that meat-eaters contribute 50 to 54 percent more food-related greenhouse gases than vegetarians and 99 to 102 percent more than vegans.

Figure 1. Full Lifecycle Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Common Proteins and Vegetables



Those findings have been backed up by other studies and calculations. According to Vox, if the average person ate 152 calories of meat per day instead of 220 — which is the amount the IEA predicts the average person will be eating by mid-century — carbon emissions projections would fall significantly.

And emissions-wise, agriculture is worse for the climate than deforestation, according to a recent study.

Even the beef industry has acknowledged that food sustainability is a challenge it must face. In a public comment on the DGAC's report, Kim Stackhouse from the Cattlemen's Beef Board and USDA's Beef Checkoff Program detailed the beef industry's efforts to reduce emissions and water use.

"Only by looking holistically at food production practices can our food systems meet demand and minimize unintended consequences," Stackhouse writes. "The beef industry recognizes the important role it plays to produce food in a more sustainable manner and has committed to a journey toward more sustainable beef."

Still, that doesn't mean the industry supports the sustainability tenet of the DGAC report, as NAMI'sstatement shows.

UCS's Boucher said he hopes the USDA and HHS do include data on sustainability in the guidelines.

"I think if [the guidelines] would simply identify the foods that have highest carbon footprint or greenhouse gas footprint, that would be, I think, the really important contribution," Boucher said.

"And that would surprise people a whole lot, because they would see the impacts of what they choose to eat and serve."

Kendra Klein, senior program associate for Physicians for Social Responsibility, said her group has been "excited and very hopeful" that the USDA start addressing diet's

influence on the environment — in terms of carbon emissions and in terms of pesticide and land use.

"I think it's fundamental that we all begin talking about nutrition as something that is not only about the individual eater but is about food systems," she said."I think that's a very important piece about redefining healthy food: people understanding themselves as part of a larger social and environmental system."

Even if the USDA doesn't factor sustainability into its dietary guidelines this year, however, Klein said that in the coming years it will be harder and harder for the agency to ignore food's impact on the environment. As fisheries are depleted and droughts and flooding makes it harder for farmers to count on consistent crops, it will become clearer that food's relationship with environmental health needs to be acknowledged, she said.