CENTER for BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

U.S. Lags Behind Other G20 Nations at Adding Sustainability Into Dietary Guidelines

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, or DGA, have enormous influence on food and nutrition policy and food purchasing. The DGA guide government agencies and programs as well as schools, institutions and cities across the country. Global experts, including the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)[1] and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, have identified healthy and sustainable diets as essential to addressing the climate and biodiversity crises.[2] The FAO also noted that dietary guidelines are "an obvious strategy" to address sustainability through dietary change, specifically plant-based diets and reduction of red meat consumption.[3]

Fewer than half of national dietary guidelines around the world include environmental sustainability. But that number has been rapidly growing over the past 10 years,[4] with an increase in recommendations to reduce meat consumption and an emphasis on plant-based diets. Aligning dietary guidelines with sustainability goals is particularly important in G20 countries, where current per capita consumption of meat and dairy is higher than the global average.[5]

The Center for Biological Diversity analyzed G20[6] dietary guidelines updated in the past 10 years for the inclusion of sustainability. Within this scope nearly 80% (11/14) discuss the impacts of dietary patterns on sustainability or the environment. More than 70% (10/14) call for limits on red meat lower than current consumption, while more than 85% (12/14) recommend plant-based diets or increasing consumption of plant protein foods such as beans, legumes and soy. The United States is represented only in the last category and acknowledges plant-based diets as one way to implement a nutritious, healthy diet; sustainability goals are not mentioned.

This analysis shows that the Dietary Guidelines for Americans — currently going through the 2025-2030 revision process — have fallen behind other G20 countries in including sustainability. While the current U.S. DGA acknowledge the general need to increase legume consumption, they remain silent on any recommendation to reduce red meat, as well as any mention of sustainability concerns. Despite earlier commitments to include sustainability in the 2025 DGA, the DGA agencies have backed off this promise, preferring to study pathways for *future* inclusion. But the severe urgency of the environmental crises and their impact on the health of Americans and our food system demand that sustainability be included in the 2025 dietary guidelines.

ANALYSIS

G20 Nations	Discusses dietary impacts on sustainability or environment	Recommends reduced meat consumption or analysis indicates such	Recommends "plant-based" diet or "plant-based" protein foods individually or collectively	Year Updated
ARGENTINA	✓	✓	✓	2016
AUSTRALIA	✓	✓	✓	2013
BRAZIL	✓	-----	-----	2015
CANADA	✓	-----	✓	2019
CHINA	-----	✓	-----	2016
EUROPEAN UNION	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
FRANCE	✓	✓	✓	2019
GERMANY*	✓	✓	✓	2022
INDIA	-----	-----	----	2011
INDONESIA	-----	✓	✓	2014
ITALY	✓	✓	✓	2018
JAPAN**	✓	✓	✓	2016, 2018
MEXICO	✓	✓	✓	2023
RUSSIA	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
SAUDI ARABIA	------	------	-----	2012
SOUTH AFRICA	✓	-----	✓	2013
SOUTH KOREA	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
TURKEY	------	------	-----	2006
UNITED KINGDOM	✓	✓	✓	2016
UNITED STATES	-----	-----	✓	2020

* Germany has only issued a sustainability statement. Indicator marks in 3rd and 4th columns reflect content expected in formal dietary guidelines document scheduled to be released in 2023.

** Japan's dietary guidelines appear to have been updated in 2016, but are very brief. The website also appears to reference the Mediterranean diet as described in the 2018 update of the Italian Dietary Guidelines as a standard for both health and sustainability.

n/a: Document is not known to exist or could not be located.

METHODOLOGY

The Center analyzed the dietary guidelines of G20 nations using basic document search tools. The EU was excluded from the analysis since it does not issue EU-wide guidelines. Five other countries were excluded from the analysis; three have not updated their guidelines within the past decade (India, Saudia Arabia and Turkey), and two did not have documents accessible through the UN FAO dietary guidelines online database (Russia and South Korea). Of the remaining 14 countries, 11 discuss impacts of dietary patterns on sustainability or the environment; 10 call for limits on red meat consumption lower than current levels; and 12 recommend plant-based diets or increasing consumption of plant protein foods like beans, legumes and soy. Most limits on general meat or red meat in particular averaged less than 3 ounces per day, which is still more than twice that recommended in the Planetary Health Diet established by the EAT Lancet Commission. Moreover, U.S. red meat consumption averages more than eight times that of the Planetary Health Diet recommendation.[7] While most of these G20 guidelines have been criticized for not being sufficiently healthy or sustainable,[8] the United States is among the six most extreme G20 consumers of red meat.[9]

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

National dietary guidelines — and their significant influence on food systems — are deeply intertwined with environmental emergencies. Those emergencies harm our climate, water and wildlife and impact public health, farming and food security.

The effects of the climate crisis on temperature, rainfall and soil erosion are already harming food production and increasing crop losses to disease, insects and spoilage. This not only threatens food supplies but also affects variety, food prices and food security.[10,11] Climate change is also expected to degrade the nutrition quality of the food that is grown.[12] Animal agriculture also consumes vast amounts of critical water resources better used for edible food crops, especially in the western United States, where shortages are threatening people and wildlife alike.[13] As with other climate impacts, low-income communities of color are likely to be disproportionately harmed by the effects of the climate crisis on the food system.[14]

Dietary choices and nutrition policies that favor meat and dairy worsen these crises. Meat and dairy production have such an effect on climate that, even if fossil fuel emissions ended today, worldwide we still wouldn't be able to meet emissions-reduction targets without also addressing animal agriculture.[15]

RECENT EFFORTS TO ADDRESS SUSTAINABILITY IN THE DGA

Sustainability was launched to the forefront of the conversation around U.S. national dietary guidelines during the process to issue the 2015-2020 DGA, when the experts on the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, or DGAC, included the importance of sustainable dietary guidance in its scientific report.[16] However, the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services excluded sustainability and its effects on food security and personal and public health from the final guidelines.[17]

Although the subsequent report of the 2020 DGAC continued this pattern, the 2020 DGAC urged agency leaders to "examine these topics to support improved dietary intake among Americans."[18] The 2020 DGA did finally acknowledge plant-based diets as healthful, but it did not recommend a shift toward plant-based diets for the nation even for health and nutrition. This pattern of excluding sustainability contradicts the DGA's purpose to support healthy diets and food security, as well as President Biden's stated priorities around equity and the climate crisis.[19,20]

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