

MEMORANDUM

April 15, 1999

To: Tom Friedman

From: Michael F. Jacobson

Re: Nutrition initiative

I am excited by your interest in nutrition. Improving nutrition is incredibly important, considering its impact on obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis, heart disease, stroke, cancer, tooth decay, etc.

An inter-agency (USDA and HHS, I presume) council might be a good way to get things moving -- *provided* that the White House exercised leadership and insisted on meaningful programs and regulatory actions. I have enclosed a letter we sent to Secretary Glickman, which suggested a variety of activities that USDA could undertake. We're still hoping that USDA will do *something*.

Some of the things that the White House might ask the agencies to deliver on include:

I. Regulatory

- * **Improve the labeling of ground beef:** Add Nutrition Facts labels and ensure appropriate use of terms like "lean." USDA officials are considering requiring nutrition labeling, but need a push.
- * **Improve the Nutrition Facts label:** Separate "sugars" into "total" and "added" (FDA). That would help encourage people to eat more foods (fruit, dairy) with naturally occurring sugars and fewer foods with added sugars. FDA is unlikely to do this on its own. A second measure would be to require that *trans* fats, which form when oils are hydrogenated and are as bad as saturated fats, be included in with saturated fat on the Nutrition Facts label. In response to a CSPI petition, the FDA sent a proposed regulation to OMB a month or two ago.
- * **Restaurant nutrition:** Now that packaged foods have nutrition labels, people increasingly are eating foods that have no labels: at restaurants. The administration could support legislation that would require chain restaurants to provide a modicum of information. For instance, fast-food chains could provide *calories* on the menu board:
"Big Mac -- 540 calories -- \$1.99."

That would give people one important fact concerning the \$100 billion or so of fast food that Americans eat.

II. Non-regulatory

- * **Community-wide healthy-eating campaigns:** The *single most important activity* would be to provide funding to CDC to conduct (or fund state health departments to conduct) campaigns designed to *actually improve eating habits*. CSPI's six-week-long paid-media campaigns in several small towns have *doubled* the market share of 1% and fat-free milk; those changes were sustained, according to follow-up surveys. Tens of millions of dollars annually should be provided to support such proven campaigns as 1% Or Less (milk) and 5-A-Day (fruits/vegetables; National Cancer Institute provides negligible funding now) and to test new campaigns on other aspects of the diet.
- * **Obesity:** The federal government should develop a coordinated approach to increasing physical activity and reducing caloric consumption. Activities would range from helping cities build bike paths to discouraging television watching. Agencies as disparate as the Departments of Education, Transportation, Justice, Agriculture, and HHS should be involved. See the attached letter for a few more details. I could send you information on a National Summit Meeting on Obesity Policy, if you wish. Procter and Gamble is supportive of this, too.
- * **Sugar:** Consumption of refined sugars (largely due to soft drinks) has soared in recent years. In addition to the improved labeling mentioned earlier, we have encouraged USDA to commission a study on the consumption and health impact of refined sugars.
- * **Schools:** Soft-drink and fast-food companies have turned schools into marketing battlegrounds, students' health be damned. The administration could support legislation that would broaden the ban on "competitive foods" (those that compete with the school lunch). Currently, USDA bans the sale of soft drinks, gum, and popsicles in the cafeteria during lunch time. Ideally, that ban would be extended to additional foods (candy bars, fries, etc.) and to the whole school during most or all of the school day. Industry and school principals would oppose that. Related: Senator Leahy, a long-time friend of school nutrition, plans to introduce legislation that would ban the *giving away* of soft drinks during lunchtime.

One other measure: Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition. A law passed about five years ago requires such a report every two years. We're still waiting for the first one. Perhaps a push from the White House (and some money) would help.

I hope you'll be able to get things moving. We'll help however we can -- just tell me how.



Center for
Science in the
Public
Interest

Publisher of

Nutrition Action Healthletter

November 17, 1998

Hon. Dan Glickman, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
14th & Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Glickman:

As the director of a nonprofit organization that vigorously promotes healthier diets, I was excited to learn of your growing interest in nutrition and childhood obesity. Your leadership could make a great deal of difference, because nutrition/obesity/physical activity has received little attention from decision-makers. Your recent speech at USDA's symposium on childhood obesity marked an excellent beginning.

As you develop plans to improve the public's health and prevent obesity, we urge you to think and act boldly. Doing the usual -- hanging nutrition posters in WIC clinics, printing a nutrition pyramid on a pack of food stamps, or developing public-service announcements for broadcasters -- would be unlikely to help much. USDA needs to promote nutrition for the general public, as well as within the confines of WIC, food stamps, school meals, and other federal food programs. Measures such as the ones we suggest below could actually begin to reverse unfavorable dietary trends and improve the public's diet, waistline, and health.

1. USDA should make it a top priority to sponsor pilot programs to study and improve the effectiveness of **community-wide healthy-eating campaigns**, such as CSPI's 1% Or Less (highly successful efforts motivating people to switch to low-fat and fat-free milk). We know that such programs work. They involve short-term *paid* media campaigns, coupled with public relations and activities at schools and workplaces, targeting entire communities. Campaigns should encourage individuals and families to switch to low-fat milk, eat lower-fat cheese, eat more fruits and vegetables, replace soft drinks with nutritious beverages, eat whole grains instead of refined grains, base diets more on vegetables and grains, and eat less and leaner meat.

USDA should provide grants to state or local health departments and should mobilize land-grant colleges, extension agents, and other USDA resources (along with interested industries, in some cases) to increase the effectiveness of healthy-eating campaigns. Some of the campaigns should focus on low-income communities and on communities with especially high

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Executive Director

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rates of heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes. This program should be budgeted at a level of at least \$5 million to \$50 million in the first year, and double and triple that in the second and third years. After effective campaigns are developed and pilot tested, USDA should roll them out nationally. We are not aware of any other activity that holds greater promise for actually improving diets. Ultimately, those campaigns should be national in scope. (See Attachment A.)

2. USDA should organize, in collaboration with other federal agencies, an **Obesity Prevention Summit**. The summit would convene federal agencies (Departments of Agriculture; Health and Human Services; Justice; Housing and Urban Development; Education; and Transportation; President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports), health and citizens groups (PTA; bicyclists, walkers, and runners' organizations; American Academy of Pediatrics; American Heart Association; Boy Scouts; Girl Scouts; American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance; etc.), and industry (trade groups and major companies in the area of sporting goods, camping equipment, restaurants, food manufacturing, etc.) to *identify policies and programs* for the federal government to implement to reverse the rising rates of obesity. DHHS has had interest in this, but has dropped the ball. It is time for the federal government to mount a comprehensive initiative against obesity, and the USDA could take the lead. (See Attachment B.)

3. USDA can and should require **nutrition labeling of ground beef** (and other cuts of fresh meat and poultry). Ground beef is one of the biggest sources of fat and saturated fat in the American diet, yet packages usually do not bear nutrition labels. Nutrition labeling would enable people to choose lower-fat, lower-calorie meat. A growing number of grocery chains (e.g., Kroger, Albertson's, Jewel, Dominick's, etc.) voluntarily provide such information, proving that it is economically feasible. In 1997, CSPI petitioned for nutrition labeling of meat and poultry, but USDA has not responded. Nutrition labeling is one important, inexpensive, pro-nutrition action that USDA could do immediately and on its own. (See Attachment C.)

4. **School-food programs** offer an opportunity to influence children's diets in one important part of children's lives.

USDA should encourage states and school districts to **restrict the availability of competitive foods**, such as soft drinks, candy, chips, hamburgers, tacos, pizza, and french fries, to a greater extent than what USDA currently is allowed to do. USDA should publicize the states and school districts that already have extra restrictions. In addition, USDA should ensure that competitive foods do not undermine the quality of school lunches by adopting regulations that would require *each* competitive food sold in cafeterias to meet nutritional (fat, saturated fat, sodium) criteria for school lunches. That would ensure, for instance, that the fat in a pizza or french fries would not comprise more than 30 percent of calories and, thus, would not reduce the nutritional quality of school lunches. While dietary guidelines usually are used to evaluate diets over a day, week, or longer period, it would be perfectly appropriate to apply such guidelines to

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individual foods for the purpose of protecting the nutritional quality of school meals. USDA also could encourage states and school districts to adopt such criteria.

USDA, as Under Secretary Shirley Watkins has suggested, could honor schools and school districts with **Health Excellence Awards** for promoting good nutrition (highly nutritious foods in cafeterias, minimal sale of competitive foods in cafeterias and elsewhere in schools, exemplary teaching of nutrition) and physical fitness (daily physical education, with an emphasis on activities that promote fitness).

USDA should periodically evaluate the **nutritional impact of fast-food outlets and vending machines** in schools. How many restaurants, soda vending machines, and food shops are in schools? What is their penetration in elementary, middle, and high schools? How much food do those venues provide? What is the likely impact of the new multi-year exclusive-marketing contracts that school districts are signing with soft-drink companies?

5. You were right (and courageous) to identify television as a major cause of childhood obesity. Regrettably, little can be done to get rid of the incessant commercials for candy bars, sugary cereals, and other low-nutrition products. But what USDA and other agencies could do is encourage children (and their families) to watch less TV and engage in physical activities and other family activities. We urge you to collaborate with the Department of Education and the Surgeon General, along with private organizations (teachers, librarians, scouts, PTA), to sponsor an annual, national **No-TV Week**. A small non-profit organization, TV-Free America, now sponsors such an event, but federal leadership would turn it into a major, annual -- and effective -- national event.

6. Considering current congressional reluctance to fund health-education campaigns, it likely would take a special tax or related funding mechanism to provide the needed funding. USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) should evaluate how feasible it would be for **states to levy taxes on low-nutrition foods** and use the revenues to promote better nutrition and health. Professor Kelly Brownell of Yale University has urged that substantial taxes, along the lines of excise taxes on tobacco and alcohol, be levied on low-nutrition foods to provide funds to subsidize the cost of fruits, vegetables, and other high-nutrition foods. CSPI has proposed small taxes, which would have little impact on consumer prices, on soft drinks and other low-nutrition foods to fund health-education campaigns (or bike paths, physical-education classes, or whatever else states might want to do). Arkansas, Tennessee, Washington, and West Virginia already have such taxes, with West Virginia using the revenues to fund its medical school.

An alternative mechanism for fostering and funding health-promotion campaigns would be to provide **economic incentives for agribusiness, supermarkets**, or other segment of the food economy to **market healthier foods** or promote healthier lifestyles. For instance, the switch to EBT for food stamps is saving supermarkets tens of millions of dollars annually. USDA could

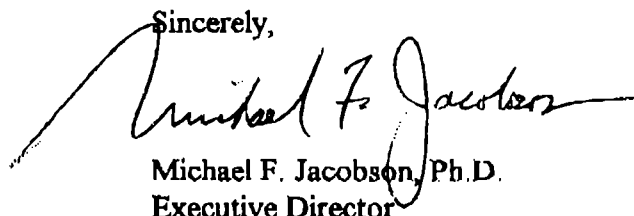
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encourage supermarket chains to promote nutrition by providing nutrition labeling on meat, removing soft drinks and candy from check-out-aisle displays, and placing candy and sugary cereals on high shelves. For chains that do not implement such measures, USDA could reduce reimbursement for food stamps by an amount equivalent to half the savings generated by EBT and transfer that amount into a fund to support health campaigns. We are confident that ERS could devise numerous other such mechanisms to encourage healthy eating.

We greatly appreciate your consideration of our suggestions and would be glad to discuss them in person, if you wish. We will be following with great interest your progress on this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michael F. Jacobson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.
Executive Director