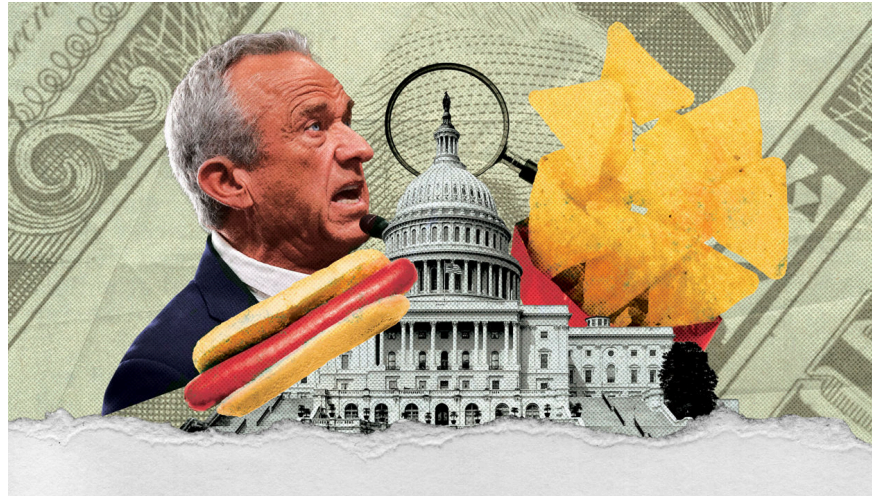


# US ultraprocessed food policy accelerates with bipartisan support

**c&en** [cen.acs.org/policy/US-ultraprocessed-food-policy-accelerates/104/web/2026/01](https://cen.acs.org/policy/US-ultraprocessed-food-policy-accelerates/104/web/2026/01)

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## Key Insights

- State and federal policymakers are beginning to take action to curb consumption of ultraprocessed foods in the US, even as the definition and health effects of these foods continue to be debated.
- Grocery shoppers and schoolchildren in some states are already being affected by new policies, with more regulation to follow as Make America Healthy Again momentum continues around the country.
- The food industry is pushing back by seeking to keep attention on nutrient profiles rather than processing levels and by filing lawsuits against new state laws and regulations.

At lunchtime on a gloomy day in December, an eager crowd packed an event room at the US Senate's Dirksen office building. Officials from the Donald J. Trump administration, members of Congress, Capitol Hill staffers, nonprofit leaders, physicians, academics, and students were all there to talk and hear about a topic very much in the cultural and political zeitgeist: ultraprocessed foods.

On offer for lunch were foods meant to represent the opposite: pan-seared salmon, roasted portobello mushrooms, quinoa pilaf, baked sweet potatoes, grilled zucchini.

The event, "Eating Ourselves Sick? Ultraprocessed Foods and US Health Policy," hosted by Tufts University and the nonprofit organization Food Tank, was so well attended that guests could barely squeeze between the room's full dining tables.

"Ultraprocessed foods bring a lot of people together because they're so concerning. It's something that Republicans and Democrats should all be concerned about," Danielle Nierenberg, president of Food Tank, said at the event. Getting so many politicians to participate was "surprisingly easy," she said. "They want to talk about these issues, and they want to make sure that their constituents know that they're concerned and that they're making headway."

This gathering came at a time of growing policy action on ultraprocessed foods at the state, federal, and international levels, backed by people across the political spectrum. The food industry is fighting back, and experts forecast a litigious year ahead. In the meantime, people in the US will begin to see the effects of this movement on the foods that can be served in school lunches, on what can be bought using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and on third-party labels and certifications for products in the grocery store.

"A whole-of-government approach to tackling ultraprocessed foods is a priority for this administration."

In some ways, these developments are outpacing the scientific literature on ultraprocessed foods. The research is growing, but it remains difficult and expensive to conduct, especially amid cuts to federal science programs.

Despite those cutbacks, Trump administration officials have an interest in food and health, which the December event capitalized on.

"There is a chronic-disease epidemic in this country," Kyle Diamantas, head of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Human Foods Program, said at the event. "A whole-of-government approach to tackling ultraprocessed foods is a priority for this administration."

In another signal of the administration's focus on ultraprocessed foods, on Jan. 7, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Department of Agriculture (USDA) secretary Brooke Rollins [announced new dietary guidelines](#) with a topline message to "eat real food." The guidelines also recommend that Americans "avoid highly processed packaged, prepared, ready-to-eat, or other foods that are salty or sweet."

Civil society, industry, and academia are all paying attention.

## What is an ultraprocessed food?

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For the purposes of the new US dietary guidelines, a [highly processed food was identified \(PDF\)](#) as “any food, beverage, or engineered food-like item that is made primarily from substances extracted from foods (such as refined sugars, refined grains/starches, and refined oils) and/or containing industrially manufactured chemical additives.”

The HHS, along with the USDA and the FDA, had put out a request for information in July 2025 on a potential definition of *ultraprocessed foods*. The administration will continue to work on developing a government-wide definition, HHS press secretary Emily Hilliard says in a written statement to C&EN.

Researchers in Brazil, led by epidemiologist and University of São Paulo professor Carlos Monteiro, originally coined the term *ultraprocessed foods* in 2009 as part of research on changing dietary trends in the country. The following year, they created the Nova classification system—named with the Portuguese word for “new”—which has since become a common way to identify ultraprocessed foods.

The Nova system divides foods into four categories: unprocessed or minimally processed whole foods, like fruits, vegetables, nuts, milk, and meat; processed culinary ingredients, like salt, sugar, oils, and butter; processed foods, like fresh breads and cheeses made by combining whole foods with culinary ingredients; and ultraprocessed foods with industrial formulations, like soda pop, packaged snacks, and ready-to-eat frozen meals.

## Quiz: Test your Nova knowledge

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The Nova food classification system is one way to group foods by how much they’ve been processed. Can you correctly categorize these foods?

1 Unprocessed or minimally processed foods

2 Processed culinary ingredients

3 Processed foods

4 Ultraprocessed foods

Choose your difficulty:

1 of 8

## Apple

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Which Nova category does this food belong to?

### Correct!

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Apple

1 Unprocessed or minimally processed foods

Apples are natural foods obtained directly from plants without any alteration.

## Quiz Complete!

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6/8

75%

Great job! You know your food processing!

## Nova food classification groups

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1

### Unprocessed or minimally processed foods

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Unprocessed foods are the edible parts of plants, animals, fungi, and algae. Minimally processed foods are natural foods altered only by basic steps like drying, grinding, filtering, boiling, pasteurization, nonalcoholic fermentation, refrigeration, or freezing to extend use. These steps don't add salt, sugar, oils, or fats. These foods can be eaten by themselves.

2

### Processed culinary ingredients

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These ingredients are derived from group 1 foods or from nature by pressing, refining, grinding, milling, or drying. They are rarely consumed alone and are used mainly to prepare, season, and cook group 1 foods.

3

## Processed foods

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These products are made by adding salt, oil, sugar, or other group 2 substances to group 1 foods using various preservation or cooking methods. They are usually simple foods with just a few ingredients and may include preservatives to maintain quality but not other additives.

4

## Ultraprocessed foods

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These products are industrial formulations, often with many ingredients. They are made mostly from substances extracted from foods, plus additives. Group 1 foods are a small proportion or absent. Additives unique to this group include synthetic dyes, flavors, sweeteners, emulsifiers, sequestrants, humectants, and processing aids such as carbonating, firming, bulking, antibulking, defoaming, anticaking, and glazing agents. Processes may include extrusion, molding, and preprocessing for frying.

## Emerging science and stalled research funding

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The science of ultraprocessed foods is still debated, but there's growing momentum to say these foods harm public health and should be discouraged or even restricted.

In November, a group of international researchers including Monteiro [published a series of three papers](#) on the science, policy, and politics of ultraprocessed foods in the *Lancet* medical journal. The first paper included [a systematic review and meta-analysis](#) of more than 100 large-cohort observational studies on the consumption of these foods. The authors found that 92 of the studies showed an association between ultraprocessed foods and one or more chronic disease outcomes, such as obesity, diabetes, gastrointestinal disease, or even depression.

One of the biggest criticisms of the idea that ultraprocessed foods are inherently unhealthy is that many of these food products have poor nutritional composition, regardless of their level of processing.

"If you're an ingredient manufacturer or an advertiser or a food manufacturer or processor, there are things that you need to be monitoring both on the state and federal level."

Gunter Kuhnle, a professor of nutrition and food science at the University of Reading who was not involved in the *Lancet* series, says, "We know if you eat too much salt, fat, and sugar, it's bad for you. Does processing add anything on top of that? I don't think so."

Some critics question the adequacy of observational studies to inform public health guidance compared with randomized clinical trials, which are designed to investigate causality but are few and far between.

[One of the first such trials](#) on the health effects of ultraprocessed foods was published in 2019 and led by Kevin Hall, a nutrition scientist who worked then at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). Hall and his colleagues found that people presented with ultraprocessed meals—and told to eat as much or as little as they wanted—ate more and gained more weight than those presented with less-processed meals with the same calories, energy density, and nutrients.

At the December "Eating Ourselves Sick?" event on Capitol Hill, the NIH's director, Jay Bhattacharya, acknowledged that "the scientific community is hungry, if you will, for research on this," and that understanding topics like ultraprocessed foods "is precisely what the NIH is for."

Hall [retired early from the NIH last year](#), telling the *New York Times* and *STAT* [that the agency censored his work](#) by interfering with his interactions with reporters and that he feared officials would eventually interfere with the research itself. Hall did not reply to C&EN's requests for comment.

Hilliard, the HHS press secretary, contests Hall's account, saying, "It's disappointing that this individual is fabricating false claims. NIH scientists have, and will, continue to conduct interviews regarding their research through written responses or other means. We remain committed to promoting gold-standard research and advancing public health priorities. Any attempt to paint this as censorship is a deliberate distortion of the facts."

In May, the NIH and the FDA announced a new joint [Nutrition Regulatory Science Program](#), mentioning ultraprocessed foods as a potential research focus. The program's specific research agenda has not yet been announced.

At the same time, "some of the people that would be doing some of the most robust work in this space in the country right now have less funding than they've ever had," because of research funding cuts by the Trump administration, says Fatima Cody Stanford, a physician scientist and professor of medicine at

Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School who specializes in obesity medicine. Harvard University's School of Public Health, for example, has its "lowest funding levels ever," she says. "I think you'll probably see other countries leading this work."

The *Lancet* authors argue that while the science is still developing, there's enough evidence to support limiting the consumption of ultraprocessed foods, also known as UPFs.

"We can do and we should do more research on UPF. But what we know right now justifies global public action," Monteiro said at a Nov. 18 press briefing on the *Lancet* series.

## **An emerging policy landscape**

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While policy attention on ultraprocessed foods began relatively recently in the US, other countries and regions have long been at work.

"The policy leadership on ultraprocessed foods is coming from Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa," Phillip Baker, a professor of public health at the University of Sydney and one of the *Lancet* series authors, said at the Nov. 18 briefing.

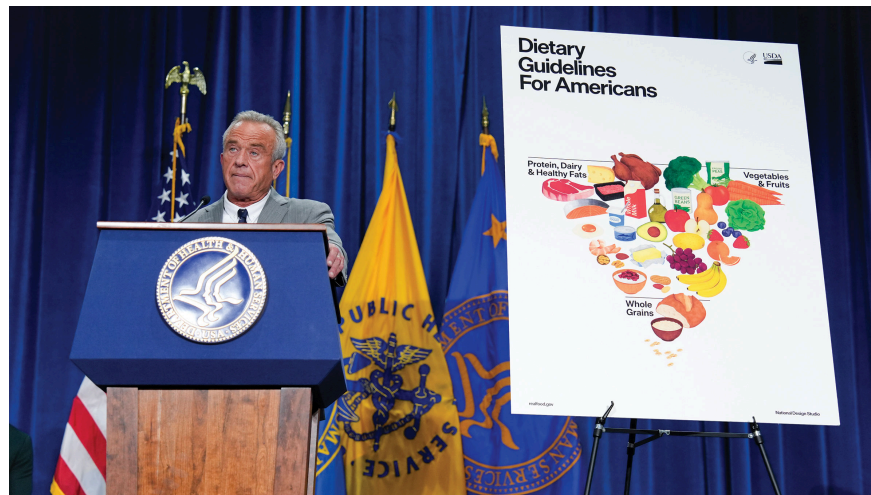
Brazil requires that 90% of the food served in school meals be whole or minimally processed starting this year. It was the first country to include a recommendation in its national dietary guidelines, in 2014, that people reduce their consumption of ultraprocessed foods.

"Ultraprocessed foods bring a lot of people together because they're so concerning. It's something that Republicans and Democrats should all be concerned about."

Colombia and Mexico impose taxes on foods and beverages that are high in fat, sugar, and salt. Both countries, as well as Chile, require front-of-package warning labels on those food products. Chile has also banned the sale of those foods in schools as well as their advertisement on television during daytime hours when children are most likely to be watching. Baker and his colleagues argue that these policies should be expanded to explicitly target ultraprocessed foods.

In the US, federal guidelines on ultraprocessed food consumption are also beginning to emerge, influenced in large part by the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) movement. But while Kennedy is the face of this movement, state

governments have taken more action to restrict the sale and consumption of ultraprocessed foods.



Robert F. Kennedy Jr. stands at a podium. A poster next to him titled "Dietary Guidelines for Americans," shows an image of an inverted food pyramid featuring protein, dairy, and healthy fats at the top left corner; vegetables and fruits at the top right corner; and whole grains at the bottom.

US Department of Health and Human Services secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. discusses the newly announced Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which recommend limiting consumption of highly processed foods, at a Jan. 8 event at his agency's headquarters. Credit: Kent Nishimura/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Perhaps the most significant federal move so far is the Jan. 7 release of the 2025–30 Dietary Guidelines for America, which address ultraprocessed foods for the first time.

The dietary guidelines inform federal food programs, from school lunches to military meals. The guidelines are updated every 5 years and usually follow the recommendations of an independent advisory committee that reviews the available scientific literature, takes public feedback, and produces a scientific report.

Appointed by the Joe Biden administration, Stanford served on the original advisory committee for the latest dietary guidelines. This committee was the first to consider whether to make a recommendation on ultraprocessed foods.

From a physician's perspective, [some processed foods are healthier](#) than others, and they can have a place in patients' diets, she says. For example, she often has older patients with muscle loss drink highly processed protein shakes.

Stanford has also watched her parents run a food pantry for more than 30 years. Many of the people who get food there have less-than-ideal housing conditions and no way to store or prepare fresh, whole foods. "They just don't have access to those resources to be able to prepare the same things that I espouse to be good for them," she says. "They're going to need some of these healthier, more processed things to allow them to sustain life. And so I have to think about these things side by side."

On a national level, the dietary guidelines advisory committee "left with some very inconclusive results," Stanford says. "Because the data was sparse." Committee members decided to pass the question on to the next committee in 5 years, hoping there would be more robust scientific literature by then.

But in a departure from the usual dietary guidelines process, the Trump administration set aside the report from the Biden-appointed committee and instead called on a new group of advisers to create a second, shorter report that informed the guidelines.

The Trump USDA and HHS ultimately decided to include a recommendation to avoid highly processed foods.

At the same time, long-running datasets such as the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) have [faced cuts that threaten their continuity](#).

"NHANES is the way that we know how people are eating," says Lisa Jahns, a registered dietitian and former USDA nutrition scientist who has researched the history of federal dietary guidelines. "It's very valuable, and it's used heavily by the dietary guidelines scientific review committees."

## Waiting on a federal definition

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Meanwhile, the US government's request for information on defining *ultraprocessed foods* is pending, after garnering more than 5,000 responses before the public comment period closed in October.

"I think a federal definition can be very useful as long as it is done thoughtfully and defined appropriately," says Eva Greenthal, a senior policy scientist at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

A [comment signed by CSPI](#) and 31 other advocacy organizations in nutrition and public health, as well as 52 individual researchers and advocates, calls for a definition that would "identify the subset of processed foods that scientific

evidence research (conducted by those without financial or personal links to the food industry) shows are clearly linked to health concerns.” The commenters recommend incorporating some elements of the Nova system but also considering ingredients and nutrient composition.

Many in the food industry back [comments from the Institute of Food Technologists \(PDF\)](#), which recommend that “definitions and policies should focus on nutritional quality and health outcomes, not on processing methods alone.”

The institute argues that existing classification systems like Nova are too broad and that the type or level of processing done to produce a food doesn’t reliably predict how healthy or unhealthy it is.

In the absence of a federal definition, states are moving ahead.

California passed a law in October phasing out ultraprocessed foods from school meals. The state departed from the Nova system, instead [listing a litany of specific ingredients](#) that would qualify a food as ultraprocessed, including stabilizing agents, dyes, emulsifiers, and nonnutritive sweeteners such as aspartame and sucralose.

The food industry should pay attention, according to Donnelly McDowell, an attorney and partner at Kelley Drye & Warren who specializes in food advertising and marketing. “If you’re an ingredient manufacturer or an advertiser or a food manufacturer or processor, there are things that you need to be monitoring both on the state and federal level,” he says.

Even cities are beginning to act. In December, San Francisco [sued several major food companies](#), alleging that their ultraprocessed food products have created a public health crisis.

And it’s not just blue cities and states taking action. Last summer, Texas passed a law requiring warning labels on food products containing any of [44 ingredients \(PDF\)](#), including certain synthetic dyes, oils, sweeteners, and other additives. The law has already been challenged, with trade groups including the American Beverage Association and the Consumer Brands Association filing a lawsuit in December alleging that such warning labels would be “false and misleading.”

Several other states have [pending or recently passed legislation](#) targeting either ultraprocessed foods as a category or certain highly processed ingredients.

At the federal level, the Trump administration has shown a preference for voluntary action by industry over regulation. For example, the HHS and the FDA are encouraging food manufacturers to phase out synthetic dyes in their products, a step that several companies and industry groups have agreed to.

One area where states and the federal government have converged is on the issue of [SNAP food-restriction waivers](#). Several states have requested—and, for the first time, been granted—waivers that permit them to restrict purchases of processed, “non-nutritious” items like soda pop and candy. These restrictions took effect in five states on Jan. 1, and more are to follow later this year.

Outside of government, third-party labeling and certification programs for food products are beginning to pop up, such as [the Non-UPF Program](#), launched in December 2024.

“My clients were asking which foods weren’t heavily processed,” says Melissa Halas, a registered dietitian and the nonprofit program’s founder and president. “Consumers are definitely more aware that many ingredients are not real foods,” she says, but at the same time, they are confused and overwhelmed in the grocery store.

While Halas would welcome more research on ultraprocessed foods’ health effects, she believes the existing evidence is strong enough to recommend that people reduce their consumption. After a pilot run over the past year, the Non-UPF Program recently opened applications for certification to any food company.

Another program, [the Non-UPF Verified Standard](#), was recently launched by the Non-GMO Project, a nonprofit organization founded by two grocery stores. The standard prohibits specific processing methods and ingredients.

McDowell expects this movement on ultraprocessed foods [to continue in 2026](#), though he also expects more litigation from the food industry in response. He adds, “I think it remains to be seen if agencies and legislatures are going to want to take action that could be seen as unpopular, to the extent they’re forcing formulation changes in long-standing, highly popular food products.”



[Delger Erdenesanaa](#) is a policy and regulation reporter covering pesticides, PFAS, and other chemicals in food, agriculture, and water.

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The science is still emerging, with researchers calling for more funding

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