

December 12, 2018

The Honorable Alex Azar  
Secretary of Health and Human Services  
US Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
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The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary of Agriculture  
US Department of Agriculture  
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To: Secretary Alex Azar, US Department of Health and Human Services, and Secretary Sonny Perdue,  
US Department of Agriculture

### **Put Public Health First and Keep Industry Influence Out of the 2020 Dietary Guidelines**

We are writing as public health and medical professionals to express concern about the process of developing the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs), which is now underway in your departments and led by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). At a time when half of US adults are living with one or more diet-related chronic diseases and nearly one in five school-age children and young people live with obesity, it is vitally important that your departments aim to improve public health by providing credible, science-based dietary recommendations to guide consumer decisions and inform the federal nutrition programs that serve our nation's most vulnerable populations<sup>1</sup>.

Since the 1980s, the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) has achieved its stated objective of developing comprehensive guidelines based on the best available nutritional science. Yet in the last iteration of the guidelines, USDA and Health and Human Services (HHS) leadership ultimately distorted and diluted the science-based recommendations of the DGAC. Now, as the 2020-2025 DGA process begins, we believe it is at greater risk of being insufficiently grounded in science and unduly influenced by the food industry. Our concerns are three-fold:

#### **1. The Trump administration has a poor track record when it comes to pursuing evidence-based policymaking and relying on scientific expertise.**

Historically, the process to develop the DGAs has been rigorous and evidence-based. The integrity of the process has been bolstered by its reliance on a DGAC composed of scientists with outstanding credentials and demonstrated expertise in health and nutrition.

However, the Trump administration's record of sidelining science and catering to big industries suggests this process is now at risk. The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has documented dozens of examples of the administration disregarding data, silencing scientists, and compromising scientific integrity in policymaking—which has frequently extended to scientific advisory committees. In a January 2018 report, UCS analyzed 73 science advisory committees across six federal departments and agencies (not including the USDA and HHS) during the administration's first year. The report found that membership on these advisory committees had decreased, and the committees met less often than in any

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2018. Childhood Obesity Facts. Online at [www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/obesity/facts.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/obesity/facts.htm). Accessed October 24, 2018.

year since the government started tracking in 1997—nearly two-thirds of them met less often than their own charters specified<sup>2</sup>.

## **2. USDA leadership in food and nutrition lacks scientific expertise, and the department's existing expertise has been marginalized.**

The administration has yet to appoint an Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) at the USDA. Currently serving as the Acting Deputy Undersecretary for FNCS is Brandon Lipps, Administrator of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). With a background in agriculture, applied economics, and law, Lipps lacks any education or experience in public health or nutritional science—making him grossly underqualified to oversee the process that will produce the nation's next dietary guidelines. By contrast, his counterpart in HHS, Dr. Don Wright, holds both a medical degree and master of public health. And though highly qualified career staff have retained positions within the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP), the recent reorganization implemented by the administration has placed CNPP under the direction of FNS—potentially compromising its autonomy and ability to independently review the scientific report produced by the DGAC.

## **3. Other USDA appointments indicate that the food industry—with heightened incentive to influence the 2020 DGAs—has improper access to the process.**

Food companies and trade associations have always sought to influence the DGAs in ways that favor their products. These entities will only have more reason to influence the development of the next dietary guidelines. The 2020-2025 DGAs will be the first to include targeted recommendations for pregnant women and infants from birth through 24 months, opening up new markets for the food industry, including makers of children's foods, sugar-sweetened beverages, and infant formula.

But industry need not rely solely on influencing the process from the outside. The appointments of deeply-conflicted individuals to influential positions in the USDA gives the industry unprecedented backdoor access to the process. Most notably, in July 2017, Kailee Tkacz—who until 2017 lobbied for corn syrup and snack food manufacturers—joined the USDA to work on the update of the DGAs. Tkacz was issued an ethics waiver contending that her participation in these issues at the USDA "is in the public interest"—though she has no training in science, public health, or nutrition, and has previously lobbied for two firms that have attempted to weaken federal recommendations on added sugar<sup>3</sup>.

Secretary Azar and Secretary Perdue, we urge you to defy the administration's troubling tendency to disregard science in the interest of big industries. To do so in the development of the 2020-2025 DGAs would both undermine the integrity of the DGA process and pose substantial threats to the health of our nation. Instead, we ask that you keep science at the center of the process and reject any industry influence that might compromise the efficacy of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Sincerely,

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<sup>2</sup> Reed, G., Shulman S., Hansel P., and Goldman G. 2018. Abandoning Science Advice: One Year in, the Trump Administration Is Sidelining Science Advisory Committees. Cambridge, MA: Union of Concerned Scientists. Online at [www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2018/01/abandoning-science-advice-full-report.pdf](http://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2018/01/abandoning-science-advice-full-report.pdf). Accessed October 12, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, L. 2018. The Snack Food and Corn Syrup Lobbyist Shaping Trump's Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The Project On Government Oversight (POGO). Online at [www.pogo.org/investigation/2018/08/the-snack-food-and-corn-syrup-lobbyist-shaping-trumps-dietary-guidelines-for-americans](http://www.pogo.org/investigation/2018/08/the-snack-food-and-corn-syrup-lobbyist-shaping-trumps-dietary-guidelines-for-americans). Accessed October 24, 2018

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