



Consumer Focus

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Dietary activism

Beginning in 1980, the USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) jointly issued the Nutrition Guidelines, recommendations from the federal government on healthy eating. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans is reviewed, updated and published every five years. Beginning with the 1985 edition, HHS and USDA have appointed a Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) that is supposed to consist of nationally recognized experts in the field of nutrition and health. The charge to the committee is to review the scientific and medical knowledge current at the time. The committee then prepares a report for the secretaries that provides recommendations for the next edition of the Dietary Guidelines based on their review of current literature.

Federal rules

According to www.health.gov/guidelines, the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* are intended for Americans ages 2 years and over, including those at increased risk of chronic disease, and provide the basis for federal food and nutrition policy and education initiatives. Though the guidelines are not law, they will affect how the federal government feeds its employees (including the military) and those who eat in government-funded facilities, including public school lunch programs, day care facilities and prisons.

The *Dietary Guidelines* may also influence dietary, food and nutrition-related laws and regulations because the USDA uses the same dietary guidelines to directly calculate benefits for low-income families with children and disabled adults. Food distributed through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), which provides assistance to pregnant women and mothers of children under age 5, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which supplements meal service in day care centers, must be aligned with the committee's official recommendations. More than 12 million people receive assistance through WIC and CACFP, according to USDA figures.

Moreover, although the DGAC guidelines do not directly govern the much larger Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or "food stamps"), the government uses them to influence the eating habits and purchasing patterns of SNAP recipients through a variety of educational campaigns. The *Dietary Guidelines* are supposed to encourage Americans to focus on eating a healthful diet — one that focuses on foods and beverages that help achieve and maintain

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a healthy weight, promote health and prevent disease.

HHS's Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion has the administrative leadership for the 2015 edition and is strongly supported by USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion in Committee and process management, and evidence analysis functions. The departments jointly review the committee's recommendations and develop and publish the revised *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* policy document.

The site www.DietaryGuidelines.gov has served as the Web platform for all materials related to the 2015 revision process, including announcements, archived webcasts of the public meetings, and submitting/viewing public comments. Information will also be published in the *Federal Register*.

The 2015 DGAC requested written public comments (submitted through the Public Comments Database at www.DietaryGuidelines.gov) through Dec. 30, 2014. The comments are available at www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2015/comments/Default2.aspx.

Early in 2015, the *Report of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee* will be submitted to the Secretaries of the Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture.

After submission, a *Federal Register* notice will be published announcing the availability of the report, a public comment period and the date for a public meeting for providing comments to the federal government on the report.

The public comments database will reopen to accept public comments to the federal government on the committee's report on the date given in the *Federal Register* notice.

Controversy

The 2015 DGAC appointed a subcommittee, "Food Sustainability and Safety," which, according to the summary of the second meeting of the DGAC Jan. 13-14, 2014, had "topics under consideration" including: "(1) food sustainability and dietary patterns, (2) beef sustainability and consumption patterns related to long-term food security, (3) fishery practices and seafood sustainability and consumption related to long-term food security and current *Dietary Guidelines* recommendations, and (4) organic vs. intensive conventional growing practices on micronutrient and phytochemical content of foods."

At its final meeting Dec. 15, 2014, the DGAC report submitted the following recommendation, "A diet higher in plant-based foods ... and lower in animal-based foods, is more health promoting and is associated with less environmental impact than is the current U.S. diet."

Members of the agricultural industry were not the only ones who questioned the committee's recommendation and the motivations of the subcommittee on sustainability. Erik Telford of the Capital Research Center noted, "None of the committee members has ever held a job outside of academia. There is not a single business owner, family physician, working nutritionist, foodservices executive or federal nutrition program director" on the 15-member committee.

Telford also said, "The committee is stacked with radical 'green' activists who are placing sustainability and a push towards

veganism (no meat, fish, eggs or dairy) over sound nutrition principles.”

The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) released this statement Dec. 15, 2014, from Texas medical doctor and cattle producer Richard Thorpe on the DGAC meeting to discuss the *2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, where the committee made clear their intention to remove lean beef and reduce red-meat consumption from healthful dietary guidelines:

“Despite a large body of strong and consistent evidence supporting lean beef’s role in healthy diets, the *Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee* appears to be out of touch with today’s lean meat supply in the retail counter and the 30+ years of nutrition advice showcasing the benefits of lean beef. I am deeply disappointed that the committee missed this opportunity to positively influence the American diet by blatantly disregarding sound science and removing lean beef from a healthful dietary pattern.

“Today, for the second time, the committee presented and agreed to evidence showing that there are healthy dietary patterns with red meat intake above current U.S. consumption levels. Against their own review of the science, the committee is recommending healthy diets should be lower in red meat than they are today. The

committee has turned a blind eye to their own evidence library criteria, arbitrarily excluding peer-reviewed, sound science on the health benefits of lean beef.

“To recommend that Americans eat less of a heart-healthy protein, the only area of the existing guidelines currently consumed within the recommended amounts, demonstrates that this committee has its own agenda, and it is not guided by the evidence. This flawed process and committee bias is preventing a fair and reasonable discussion of the true science. I encourage the secretaries to take a step back and look closely at the inconsistency and absurdity of the committee’s recommendation.”

Nutrition and politics

Congress has even issued an opinion. The House Appropriations Committee addressed the sustainability development on the DGAC with the following statement that accompanied the FY 2015 *Agriculture Appropriations Bill*:

“The committee is concerned that the advisory committee for the *2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* is considering issues outside of the nutritional focus of the panel. Specifically, the advisory committee is showing an interest in incorporating sustainability, climate change, and other

environmental factors and production practices into their criteria for establishing the next dietary recommendations, which is clearly outside of the scope of the panel.

“The committee directs the secretary to ensure that the advisory committee focuses only on nutrient and dietary recommendations based upon sound nutrition science and not pursue an environmental agenda. Should environmental or production factors be included in the panel’s recommendations to USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services, the committee expects the secretary to reject their inclusion in the final *2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.”

Americans have always been confused about healthy diets, and past *Dietary Guidelines* have been based more on politics than nutritional science, according to Telford, and have always fallen short of providing clear, consistent recommendations. Figuring out what to eat for optimum health is difficult enough. As Marshall Matz and Nathan Fretz said in a June 2014 opinion written for *AgriPulse*, “The DGAC, HHS and USDA should heed the advice of Congress and stick to ‘dietary recommendations based upon sound nutrition science and not pursue an environmental agenda.’”

