

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Testimony of Eric J. Hentges
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Before the House Committee on Government Reform
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am Eric J. Hentges, Executive Director of the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP). I am pleased to be here this morning to speak about the efforts of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and particularly the Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services policy area in the Department to combat overweight and obesity by encouraging Americans to eat smart and adopt an overall healthy lifestyle. FNCS Under Secretary Eric M. Bost regrets that he was unavailable to appear before you today due to a prior speaking commitment. Under Secretary Bost extends his best wishes to you and the Committee.

Under Secretary Bost manages CNPP and the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). The Department of Agriculture is vertically integrated on nutrition - from research on human nutrition needs to the nutrient content of foods; to production, distribution and safe handling of foods; to distribution of approximately \$47.5 billion in nutrition assistance in 2004; to nutrition education and promotion programs, including partnering with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) on dietary guidance.

One of USDA's major, Departmental strategic goals is to improve the nation's nutrition and health. The Department, relying heavily on the Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services policy area, has committed to obesity targets and several other nutrition-related performance measures.

USDA and its partners are uniquely suited to take a multidimensional, coordinated, food systems approach to the national obesity and overweight problem. Within USDA, the Agricultural Research Service, the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, the Economic Research Service, and, of course, FNS and CNPP collaborate with each other to help Americans, particularly low-income Americans improve their food and lifestyle choices. The Secretary has established a coordinating panel to better focus these efforts. And in February she called upon FNCS Under Secretary Eric Bost and Under Secretary for Research, Education and Economics Joe Jen to do an audit of USDA's current nutrition education programs, looking at how we can better work with other agencies of government in getting the message out.

THE FOOD, NUTRITION, AND CONSUMER SERVICES AREA AT USDA

CNPP and FNS work, closely together to provide effective consistent nutrition messages to the general public as well as the participants in our nutrition assistance programs. CNPP, in concert with the DHHS is responsible for the revisions being made to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans as well as the Food Guide Pyramid, USDA's current food guidance system. FNS administers 15 nutrition assistance programs including the Food Stamp Program, the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, and the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) that serve as our national nutrition safety net for 1 in every 5 Americans.

As everyone is well aware, our nation faces an epidemic of obesity. Recent data tell us that 64% of adults aged 20-74 are either overweight or obese. The statistics on our children are equally troubling. Over the past 20 years, the percentage of children who are overweight has more than doubled. The percentage of adolescents who are overweight has tripled. Poor diets and lack of physical activity are related to 400,000 deaths each year and now represent the second leading cause of preventable death after smoking.

In 2000, the price tag for obesity was a staggering \$117 billion per year. Recent estimates indicate that direct medical costs for obesity may have reached \$92.6 billion or 9.1% of all U.S. health expenditures. Approximately half of these costs were paid by Medicare and Medicaid.

Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion

As you know, at CNPP we are in the midst of reviewing and updating the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Food Guide Pyramid, our current food guidance system.

Helping Americans live longer, better, and healthier lives is a top priority for President Bush, Secretary Veneman, Under Secretary Bost and me. The President's HealthierUS initiative sets the overall framework for our work and emphasizes the importance of nutrition combined with physical activity, prevention and making healthier choices. The overall goal for the revision of our food guidance system is to develop individualized tools to assist Americans in developing healthier lifestyles and improve overall health. The challenge of obesity did not appear overnight; it will not be solved overnight, and we cannot solve it alone.

USDA, along with our partners at Health and Human Services, is implementing an open process that utilizes the latest scientific and medical knowledge as well as the input of leading health and nutrition experts from across the country. The revisions to our food guidance system are based upon science for which there is a consensus supported by a preponderance of data.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans

The *National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act of 1990* (7 U.S.C. 5341), Public Law 101-445, requires the Secretaries of Agriculture and Health and Human Services to jointly publish the Dietary Guidelines for Americans at least every five years. The Guidelines must: (1) contain nutritional and dietary information and guidelines for the general public; (2) be based on the preponderance of current scientific and medical knowledge; and (3) be promoted by each Federal agency in carrying out any Federal food, nutrition, or health program. USDA and HHS voluntarily issued the Dietary Guidelines in 1980, 1985, and 1990. The 1995 edition was the first statutorily mandated report.

The Dietary Guidelines provide the basis for Federal nutrition policy. The Dietary Guidelines provide advice for healthy Americans ages 2 years and over about food choices that promote health and prevent disease. The Dietary Guidelines cast a large shadow. They form Federal nutrition policy, set standards for the nutrition assistance programs, guide nutrition education programs, and provide dietary advice to consumers. The Dietary Guidelines also serve as the vehicle for the Federal government to speak with "One voice" on nutrition issues for the health of the American public.

USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have jointly undertaken a comprehensive process to review and publish the 6th edition of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which will be released in early 2005. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans are updated every 5 years to assure the public that they are receiving the latest, most scientifically sound nutrition advice available.

Last year, USDA and DHHS convened a Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) comprised of 13 nationally-recognized, independent experts in the fields of nutrition and health to review the latest scientific and medical research, and to recommend to Secretary Veneman and Secretary Thompson any revisions to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans that the Committee believe are necessary.

The first meeting of the 2005 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee occurred on September 23-24, 2003. The fourth meeting of the Advisory Committee took place last week, May 26-27, 2004. An additional meeting will occur later this month in order to complete discussions and provide sufficient time for the Committee to finish its work. The Committee report will be published and made available to the public (in print and via Internet). From this report, the two Departments will review and jointly publish the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 6th Edition.

All meetings were announced in the Federal Register and were open to the public. There were opportunities for oral and written testimony to be provided to the Committee. Meeting minutes have been posted on the Internet. We expect to receive a report from the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee this summer. As we prepare to revise the Dietary Guidelines, we are mindful of the critical contribution they make to life-long eating habits and good health.

Food Guide Pyramid

Our responsibility does not end with the update of the Dietary Guidelines. On a separate but parallel track, we are in the middle of also updating the Food Guide Pyramid, our current food guidance system. While the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend nutrition guidance, the Food Guide Pyramid was created as a teaching tool to assist the public in eating a healthful diet.

Last September, we placed a notice in the Federal Register asking the public for comment on the technical underpinnings to the Food Guide Pyramid. The technical underpinnings consist primarily of the newly issued Dietary Reference Intakes (DRI) by the National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine. These are the most credible scientifically based nutrient recommendations available throughout the world. In fact, other countries use the DRI's in forming their own nutrition guidance.

It should be noted that this marked the first time the Federal Register had been used to solicit public input in developing food guidance by the Department of Agriculture in our 100 year tradition of developing and providing food guidance. Using the Federal Register system opens the process up to the public. We intend for the public to be active partners and participants in the development of a new food guidance system.

To ensure that USDA's new food guidance system is in harmony with the recommendations of the DGAC, the daily food intake patterns will be finalized once the DGAC completes its work. The technical work on the revision of the new food guidance system has been and will continue to be shared with the DGAC.

USDA received widespread support for the science-based revisions proposed for the food guide. Specifically, comments supported:

- Using energy levels for sedentary individuals as the basis for assessing nutrient adequacy,
- Using Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs), Adequate Intakes (AIs) and other standards from the DRI reports as nutritional goals,
- Using household measures (cups or ounces) to express amounts to eat each day rather than servings per day,
- Emphasizing unsaturated fats and oils, whole grains, legumes, and dark green vegetables

A second Federal Register notice will be published this summer to provide the public the opportunity to comment on USDA's plans for the graphic image and the educational messages for the new food guidance system.

Implementation, the plan to inform and educate Americans, is the last and most critical stage in the revision of the DGA and the new food guidance system. Research tells us that people recognize the image but don't follow it. That is why we are so committed to full implementation and exploring more effective ways to reach the public to assist them in incorporating the new food guidance system into their lives

Examples of changes we are considering include:

- Using common household measures like "cups" and "ounces, instead of using "servings".
- Moving toward more personalized or individualized guidance, instead of a one-size fits all approach.
- Moving toward interactive guidance via the Internet, instead of relying primarily on paper pamphlets.

We are excited about this new dynamic approach to food guidance for the public, and we hope that you and the members of this Committee will be supportive of our efforts to move forward with the full implementation of the new food guidance system.

FNS Major Obesity Initiatives

While CNPP has a lead role in creating dietary guidance for the Nation, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service also plays a critical role in promoting healthy diets and healthy lifestyles for Federal nutrition assistance program participants through nutrition education and promotion. These programs touch the lives of 1 in 5 people in the United States each year. They represent a prime opportunity to help low-income people – who tend to experience a disproportionate share of nutrition-related problems – change their eating and physical activity practices to achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

As you may know, Mr. Chairman, most of the Federal nutrition assistance programs were developed at a time when food was much less plentiful in some parts of the country than it is today. Their primary purpose in improving diets was to address the consequences of a lack of access to nutritious food. Today, we face a rise in health problems related to over consumption of food – including obesity. However, this does not mean that hunger and poor nutrition and related health problems do not persist.

The fact is that hunger and obesity *co-exist* in the United States; they are no more mutually exclusive problems than are heart disease and cancer. The Federal government has a responsibility to address both, and we are committed to ensuring access both to enough food, and to the skills and motivation to eat healthfully, for all those who need it.

Some have suggested that the combination of benefits provided contribute to the growing problem of overweight and obesity. FNS recently formed a panel of scholars to review the existing body of scientific evidence to determine if there is a basis for drawing conclusions about the relationship between overweight, obesity, poverty, and participation in nutrition assistance programs. While their work is not complete, they have come to some important conclusions:

- First, poverty has been established to be associated with obesity in some groups. There is evidence to suggest that the relationship between poverty and obesity can work in either direction. (In other words, poverty may contribute to obesity, and obesity may contribute to poverty.)
- But more importantly for this question, the research literature provides no consistent evidence of an association – and no evidence of a causal relationship – between the three major nutrition assistance programs (Food Stamps, National School Lunch and Breakfast, and WIC) and overweight or obesity.

USDA has long recognized that Federal nutrition assistance is an important tool in promoting healthy eating and physical activity behaviors. We have been working to make such educational and promotional activities core components of Federal nutrition assistance. Key initiatives include:

- As part of the President’s HealthierUS initiative, we are integrating nutrition and physical activity promotion within and across the programs. HealthierUS is a Presidential health and fitness initiative that promotes increased physical activity, the consumption of nutritious foods, regular preventative health screenings and the avoidance of any risky behaviors, especially involving alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs.

FNS is supporting HealthierUS through multiple efforts focused on breastfeeding promotion, the Eat Smart. Play Hard.™ and Team Nutrition campaigns, providing training and developing partnerships, among many others. For example, Eat Smart, Play Hard is a cross-program initiative that uses a spokescharacter, Power Panther™, as the primary communication tool to deliver nutrition and physical activity messages to young children and their caregivers. It focuses on the importance of breakfast, balancing food intake and

exercise, snacks, and physical activity. Materials such as brochures, activity sheets, posters, stickers, coordinated with nutrition curricula, are used to help children, their parents, and caregivers learn healthy eating and active living behaviors.

- We are reshaping nutrition education in the Food Stamp Program to target activities that promote healthy weight. For example, we are developing new nutrition education materials that program staff can use to motivate low-income elderly people and women with children to improve their eating behaviors.
- We are improving the nutritional content of school meals, food packages and other benefits to ensure that they contribute to a healthful diet. The most recent data available indicates that in school meals served during School Year 1998/1999, the percent of calories from total fat and saturated fat were significantly lower (reduced total fat from 38% to 34% over that period) than the levels found in the first dietary assessment conducted in 1991/1992. And this improvement in content has not come at the expense of participation. In each of the past two school years, participation in our programs has increased, *and* the increase in participation has been greater than the increase in enrollment.

To support these kinds of changes, USDA's Team Nutrition provides training and technical assistance for school food service professionals to help them prepare meals that look good, taste good, and contribute to a healthy diet. USDA has also worked to improve the nutritional content and usability of the commodity foods that it provides to schools for use in meals. Over the past two decades, we have worked to reduce the levels of fat, sodium, and sugar in our commodities that we make available to schools and other outlets. Since 1992, we have offered beef patties with a fat level as low as 10%. More recently, we have offered meatless spaghetti sauce, several varieties of low-fat cheeses, and several other lower fat items.

USDA has also pioneered a partnership with the Department of Defense's Supply Center in Philadelphia, to deliver over 60 types of fresh fruits and vegetables to schools. Schools received about \$50 million worth of this product in FY 2003, and \$50 million is being made available in FY 2004.

- We are developing new ways to support healthy weight through the WIC program. The Fit WIC project developed five intervention programs that WIC and other community agencies can implement to prevent overweight in young children. The programs considered the effect of issues such as staff training, case management, food policies, nutrition education, promotion of physical activity and other areas on the program's effectiveness in addressing childhood obesity. FNS has distributed the Fit WIC implementation manual to State WIC agencies across the country. The manual includes guidance that can be used by WIC agencies to plan, develop and implement effective interventions to prevent childhood obesity.
- Promoting healthy school nutrition environments has been an area of focus for the past several years. Unhealthy beverage and food choices at school can undermine children's ability to learn and practice healthy eating. We developed and are distributing the *Changing the Scene* action kit to help local schools and communities assess the school's environment

and make changes to support healthier eating and active living behaviors. School administrators, parents, teachers, school foodservice and health professionals have ordered over 30,000 action kits.

- FNS programs provide over \$8 billion in support for fruit and vegetable consumption each year by:
 - Supporting consumer purchases in the marketplace through food stamps and farmer's market vouchers;
 - Purchasing and distributing these foods directly to schools, food banks, and other program providers; and
 - Providing nutrition education and promotion to encourage program participants, and the general public, to consume more fruits and vegetables.

FNS works through partnerships with other Federal Agencies as well as industry and professional groups to develop and distribute nutrition education materials and training resources to cooperators and participants in the nutrition assistance programs. For example, the National 5-A-Day Partnership involves USDA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Cancer Institute to further promote intake of fruits and vegetables. We recently worked together to develop the *Fruits and Vegetables Galore-Helping Kids Eat More* tool kit, which helps school foodservice professionals with planning, preparation, and promotion strategies to encourage the children they serve to consume more fruit and vegetables.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, we appreciate the Committee's interest in nutrition and its critical role in an overall healthy lifestyle for all Americans. Government has an essential role to play in helping Americans adopt a healthy lifestyle that includes eating a nutritious diet, being physically active and achieving a healthy weight. We do this by ensuring that the public has accurate, science-based information on the causes and consequences of overweight and obesity as well effectively communicating the preventive steps that people can take to lead a healthier life.

We know that government alone cannot reverse the growing trend of obesity in this country. Meeting this challenge requires partnerships - partnerships with the many stakeholders committed to combating obesity and improving the nation's nutritional status. These partners include policymakers at Federal, State and local levels, industry, health, faith-based and advocacy organizations, schools, work sites, the media and, of course, the American public. As my testimony today has outlined, FNCS is fully committed to doing all it can to address this issue.

I want to thank the Committee for the opportunity to share our efforts with you. I would be happy to answer any questions.