

A Health Sector Guide to Food System and Agricultural Policy

KEY POINTS:

- The health sector has the opportunity and responsibility to address the nation's chronic disease burden and health care cost crisis by promoting a healthy and sustainable food system.
- A wide variety of legislative initiatives to promote sustainable agricultural practices and a healthier food system would benefit from greater health sector involvement.
- The U.S. Farm Bill and the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act are two critical pieces of legislation that health care leaders can influence to ensure that future policies support healthy diets, are ecologically sound, and foster a sustainable agricultural economy.

What health care leaders need to know

Health care leaders are becoming more involved in reform of the nation's food systems and agricultural policies as a means to address the growing chronic disease burden and health care cost crisis. Poor nutrition, which links directly to America's food and agricultural policies, is a risk factor for four of the six leading causes of death in the United States: heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer. Furthermore, the current industrial model of food distribution and production has significant health impacts by promoting antibiotic resistant bacteria, air and water pollution, food-borne pathogens, climate change emissions and the declining well being of rural communities. Agricultural and food policies play such an influential role on health that many experts are arguing that future policy should be reframed through a health lens.

To effectively address the expanding ecological health crises, the health care community must become involved in food and agricultural policymaking at an unprecedented level. Health professionals can bring tremendous credibility to the movement to promote a healthier food system.

This issue brief highlights a range of policy opportunities that health care leaders can act upon to begin to shift the food system in service of health.

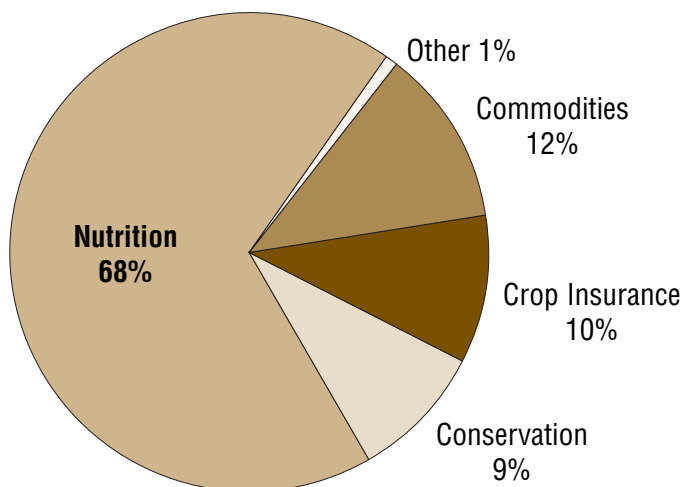
Policy is a critical tool for transforming the food system in ways that will help reverse the trend of spiraling health care costs, widening health inequalities, and rising rates of disease related to food and food production. Policies at the local, state, and federal level have helped shape and support the current food system. No single food policy reform will change the status of health in this country. Rather, a range of complementary policies that address various aspects of the food system are necessary to produce sustainable and meaningful change. This compilation of policies highlights many opportunities to put health into the framework of policy development and legislative advocacy.

Key Opportunities for Policy Influence

Two critical pieces of federal legislation will be acted upon over the next several years, with major impacts on agricultural production, community access to health foods, school lunches, and more. They are:

- **The Farm Bill** will be reauthorized in 2012. It includes hundreds of programs that influence the food production and distribution systems. It is the primary agricultural and food policy tool of the federal government and addresses issues such as nutrition, food stamps, conservation programs, agriculture trade, and more. As a result of the close interrelationship between food, agriculture and health, it should be considered a Food, Farm and Health Bill. However, the 2008 reauthorization of the Farm Bill was notable for the absence of health sector involvement.

The 2008 Farm Bill



Source: USDA, Economic Service using Congressional Budget Office estimates.

- **The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act** is up for renewal in 2009. It includes programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and school food programs, which have provided critical nutrition support for low-income families. This legislation determines guidelines and funding for the National School Lunch (SLP), School Breakfast (SBP), Summer Food Service (SFSP), Child and Adult Care Food (CACFP) and WIC programs. The reauthorization process provides an opportunity to ensure more programs reach more families and provide stronger nutritional benefits.

In addition to these federal programs, health care leaders can become involved in a broad ranging policy agenda to shift the food system in service of health. The following is an overview of some arenas for policy action.

Promote Sustainable Agricultural Production

What farmers grow, how they grow it, and how it gets to our tables has a profound impact on our health and our environment. Sound agricultural policy is the starting point for a sustainable food system.

- **Support for New and Existing Small and Mid-Sized Farms**

Preserving a network of small and mid-sized farms is at the core of forging a strong agricultural base. Support is critical to motivating and sustaining a new generation of farmers. Policies can also help owners of small- and mid-sized farms compete and succeed by opening new markets.

- **Support for Local/Regional Food Systems**

With food traveling an average of 2,500 to 4,000 miles from farm to the plate,^[i] purchasing food from regional suppliers and establishing local distribution and light processing infrastructure can help create a seamless, convenient process for everyone in the supply chain, while also reducing air pollution and reducing asthma and other respiratory illnesses.

- **Support for Improved Food Safety**

The many food-borne disease outbreaks—from spinach to hamburgers to peanut butter to pet food—have drawn attention to the weak state of the Food and Drug Administration, both in terms of its authority and its resources to protect the food supply.

- **Promote Subsidies for Healthy Foods**

Current agricultural policies underwrite a food system that is out of balance with federal nutrition policy. For instance, the 2008 Farm Bill provided \$41.6 billion to Commodity Title Programs^[ii]—including subsidy payments for corn, wheat, and soybeans, used for animal feed and as ingredients in our high calorie, highly processed food supply. The recent debate over reauthorization of the Farm Bill began to question whether these subsidies should be shifted to support production of healthier foods, such as fruits and vegetables.

- **Promote Sustainable Production Methods**

Given appropriate incentives, growers can be encouraged to engage in more sustainable agricultural production practices that protect human health and the environment. This includes policies that encourage or require growers to produce food with little or no synthetic pesticides,

hormones, or antibiotics, and to address the waste management practices of agriculture production, such as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs).

- **Reduce Pesticide Use**

Reducing pesticide use is a key health priority, not only for humans, but for all species. Organic agricultural production has successfully produced quality crops without use of harmful pesticides.

- **Regulate Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs)**

CAFOs—huge, enclosed animal feedlot operations—require appropriate regulation to preserve the environment and protect human health from antibiotic resistance and other dangers. Several states and localities have successfully addressed this issue.^[vii]

Eliminate Non-Therapeutic Antibiotics from the Food Supply

Increasing rates of antibiotic resistance in humans is making otherwise treatable illnesses harder to treat. With over 70% of all antibiotics consumed in this country being used as feed additives for poultry, swine, and beef cattle for non-therapeutic purposes,^[vi] public policy must begin to address this critical issue.

Ensure Climate Change Policy Includes Sustainable Food Systems as a Mitigation and Adaptation Strategy

About 30% of global emissions leading to climate change are attributable to agricultural activities, including land use changes such as deforestation.^[v] Industrialized agriculture methods are fossil fuel intensive; the US food system accounts for an estimated 10.5 percent of the nation's energy use and 19 percent of its fossil fuel consumption.

Improve Access to Healthy Food in Underserved Neighborhoods

- Many community organizing efforts have been launched to improve and return grocery stores to underserved neighborhoods. This takes significant time, money, and government support. These efforts have relied upon public-private partnerships to reduce entry costs for new stores and to streamline their development process.

- Health care leaders can encourage local political leadership to recruit healthy food retailers and provide financial and regulatory incentives, site-related assistance, expedited permitting, and tax breaks to stimulate grocery store development and improvements in underserved neighborhoods.

Bolster SNAP (Food Stamp Program)

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the new name for the Food Stamp Program designated by the 2008 Farm Bill, is the pivotal program for mitigating hunger. It provides monthly benefits through an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card, which can be used to buy foods and beverages at authorized outlets. With greater purchasing power, a low-income customer base may be able to sustain grocery stores and other food merchants in their neighborhoods. Revenue from SNAP (and from the WIC and the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Programs) has helped some farmers' markets survive in poor neighborhoods.^[vi]

Support Restrictions on Food and Beverage Marketing to Children

The Institute of Medicine issued a seminal report in 2005, "Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?," which reached the conclusion that "food and beverage marketing practices geared to children and youth are out of balance with healthful diets and contribute to an environment that puts their health at risk."^[viii] Strategies to address television advertising include working with food and beverage companies to strengthen and develop pledges restricting children's advertising and engaging media companies, including television networks and movie studios, to develop and/or reinforce their own standards for children's advertising.

Support Food Labeling and Health Claims

American consumers and health care purchasing professionals have shared their interest in receiving more transparency in the supply chain so that they may make informed decisions about the foods they buy. This includes what is in their food, how it is produced, how livestock is treated, and what chemicals, additives, and/or hormones are used to grow and produce the food.

Conclusion

New approaches to agricultural and food policy are vital if we are to reverse the trend of spiraling health care costs, widening health inequalities, and rising rates of disease related to food and food production. Future policy must promote agricultural practices that sustain ecological function and promote human and environmental health. Health care leaders have a broad range of opportunities to play a decisive role in advancing food system policies that are healthy for patients, communities, and the planet.

End Notes

- [i] Pirog et al., *Food, Fuel, and Freeways: An Iowa Perspective on How Far Food Travels, Fuel Usage, and GreenHouse Gas Emmissions* (Ames, Iowa: Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Iowa State University, 2001), pp.1,2
- [ii] Johnson, Renee. *What Is the Farm Bill?* Sept. 23, 2008. Congressional Research Service, <<http://ncseonline.org/NLE/CRSreports/08Jun/RS22131.pdf>>
- [iii] *Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America*, Apr. 29, 2008. The Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, <http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploaded_files/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Industrial_Agriculture/PCIFAP>
- [iv] Mellon et al, *Hogging It: Estimates of Antimicrobial Abuse in Livestock*, Union of Concerned Scientists: Cambridge MA, (2001).
- [v] *Food Security in a Volatile World, The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) Issues in Brief*, Island Press, 2008.
- [vi] Community Food Security Coalition. *Hot Peppers & Parking Lot Peaches: Evaluating Farmers' Markets In Low Income Communities*, Executive Summary, Retrieved on July 23, 2008 from: <http://www.foodsecurity.org/executive.html>
- [vii] "Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?" Institute of Medicine (2005). http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=11514#toc

Resources

Available at the Health Care Without Harm—Healthy Food in Health Care Website: <http://www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org>

Cultivating Common Ground: Linking Health and Sustainable Agriculture—Sustainable agriculture practices are rarely seen as viable solutions for improving nutrition and health. In this report by the Prevention Institute we learn compelling reasons to link sustainable agriculture and health sectors. Also available at http://preventioninstitute.org/pdf/Cultivating_Common_Ground_112204.pdf

Healthy Food in Health Care: A Pledge for Fresh, Local, Sustainable Food—By supporting the Healthy Food in Healthcare Pledge facilities are demonstrating leadership by sending an important signal to the marketplace about their interest in local, nutritious, sustainable food and modeling healthy food practices.

Menu for Change: A 2008 Survey of Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge Hospitals—This report provides a snapshot of what leading hospitals and health systems have accomplished to promote transparency in food production practices and advocate for public policies supportive of localized, sustainable food systems.

Fact Sheets

- Food and Food Purchasing: A Role for Health Care
- Healthy Food In Health Care: A Menu of Options
- Antibiotic Resistance and the Agricultural Overuse of Antibiotics
- Farmers' Markets and CSAs on Hospital Grounds
- A Purchasing Guide to Sourcing Dairy Products Produced Without rBGH

In Focus is a series of briefs designed to bring key research findings on important health policy issues to the attention of health policymakers. This issue brief is based on Harvie J, Mikkelsen L, Shak L., "A New Healthcare Prevention Agenda?: Sustainable Food Procurement and Agricultural Policy," 2009. Commissioned background paper for the Food Systems and Public Health Conference, Airlie Center, Warrenton, VA, April, 2009.

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