

An unexpected proposal for developing Dietary Guidelines for Americans

Two weeks ago we wrote a column on the appointment of the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (<https://tinyurl.com/y3xelntt>), and in that column we acknowledged the controversy over changing recommendations about the role of sugar, meat, milk, and overall dietary fat intake play in human health. To the extent that people take the guidelines seriously, these recommendations ultimately have an impact on what farmers grow.

A couple of days later we ran across an editorial, “We Need Better Answers on Nutrition,” (<https://tinyurl.com/yxlvta5y>) that proposes a more systematic way forward in our understanding of human nutritional needs and thus in the development of dietary guidelines that promote human health and reduce food-related illnesses like diabetes, strokes, and heart disease. The editorial was written by Dr. Joon Yun, a radiologist and American hedge fund manager; Dr. David Kessler, commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration under both President George H.W. Bush and President Bill Clinton; and Dan Glickman, Secretary of Agriculture under President Clinton. We know that many farmers will roll their eyes at the mention of Dan Glickman because he was Secretary of Agriculture during the adoption of the failed 1996 Farm Bill, but on this issue, we shouldn’t hold that against him.

In that editorial, Yun, Kessler, and Glickman propose the establishment of a National Institute on Nutrition within the National Institutes of Health. In making their case for the proposal they note that “many of the most fundamental questions about foods and health—especially their impact on the economy and the military—remain unanswered.” At present US federal agencies spend about \$1.5 billion a year on nutritional research. In a dig at those of us who have a deep affection for sweets of almost any kind, they report that we spend about \$40 billion per year on candy and that doesn’t count baked goods.

In their editorial, Yun, Kessler, and Glickman tell us that “in 2016, the direct and indirect costs of chronic diseases as a result of obesity were \$1.72 trillion—almost 10 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product.” In addition, obesity is the major reason people are disqualified from serving in the military.

They provide 15 examples of the areas of research that would fall under aegis of the new institute. Their list includes:

- “How to leverage food and nutrition policy and public-private partnerships in a ‘food is medicine’ effort to reduce health care costs;”
- “Health and metabolic effects of major food groups for which effects remain unclear or controversial, such as cheese, yogurt, whole-fat milk, unprocessed red meat, coconut oil, fermented foods, organic foods and more;”
- “Optimal diets to prevent and treat Type 2 diabetes and pre-diabetes;”
- “Effects of foods on brain and mental health, from the developing brain in infants and children to protecting against memory loss, dementia and depression later in life;” and
- “Coordinated new science for translation into national dietary guidelines and policies, such as the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.”

The systematic examination of the determinants of a healthy diet will undoubtedly affect the types of food we eat and thus the products that farmers grow. We believe that farmers and consumers, alike, have much to gain from the establishment of a National Institute of Nutrition.

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