



FACTS

Farm Bill Reauthorization

Protecting Benefits and Improving Diet Quality

OVERVIEW

The U.S. chronic disease burden is steadily increasing, and conditions like hypertension, cardiovascular disease (CVD), diabetes, and stroke disproportionately affect low-income individuals.^{1,2} Studies comparing the prevalence of chronic diseases among developed countries have identified diet quality to be an important factor.¹ Public health advocates are promoting a consistent farm-to-fork policy that links the foods grown and produced in the U.S. with American consumers, emphasizing those foods recommended in the science-based Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) – including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, and low-fat dairy as a way to prevent chronic disease.³

The farm bill is a multi-year piece of legislation that comprehensively addresses agriculture, food, nutrition, hunger, and public health policies.⁴ These programs were last reauthorized in 2014 and will expire in 2018. Improving access to healthy foods and making them more affordable for consumers is an important priority to improving health outcomes and ensuring a strong economy.

NUTRITION, HEALTH, AND THE ECONOMY

Unhealthy diets can lead to early death, weight gain, and increased likelihood of CVD,^{5,6,7} while a diet high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes can reduce CVD mortality rates.⁸ Poor diet quality is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke, two of the nation's deadliest and costliest, yet largely preventable chronic conditions. Expenses from CVD are expected to reach \$1.1 trillion by 2035.⁹

By increasing chronic disease prevalence and medical spending, an unhealthy diet imposes a tremendous economic burden, leading to lost earnings, lower job productivity, frequent absenteeism, and diminished military readiness.^{9,10} Healthy diets cost approximately \$550 more per year than an unhealthy diet¹¹, leading to a socioeconomic disparity in diet quality.¹² Therefore, availability, access, and cost

are important issues to address when making healthy foods more available to consumers.

- Research has shown that affordability is the primary variable in food purchasing decisions among low-income populations.¹³
- Higher fruit and vegetable prices are associated with higher body mass indexes in young children from low- and middle- income families.¹⁴
- Only half of the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables is available in the U.S. food supply, whereas red meat and poultry are available at about twice the rate recommend for healthy eating.^{3,15}

SNAP AND HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

For the last five decades, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has played a vital role in providing food security and access to nutritional meals to over 45 million vulnerable and underemployed individuals, to positively impact health and economic self-sufficiency.^{16,17}

Despite notable progress over the years, food insecurity and dietary quality remain concerns for the SNAP program.¹⁸ Beneficiaries report early exhaustion of monthly SNAP benefits, creating a month-end dietary quality gap which can lead to decreased test scores and increased disciplinary events among school-aged children, while receiving SNAP benefits can increase likelihood of completing high school by up to 18%.^{18,19,20}

SNAP is the only federal feeding program without nutrition standards.¹⁰ While dietary profiles of SNAP participants are similar to non-participants, the data indicate that SNAP recipients have worse diet quality than income-eligible non-participants, and tend to spend more on sugar-sweetened beverages.^{21,22} The data further suggests that curbing sugary drinks from SNAP is estimated to produce savings of \$2,900 per Quality Adjusted Life Year along with 52,000 fewer deaths from heart attack and stroke over ten years, and a decrease in 510,000 diabetes person years.²³ SNAP has significantly contributed to addressing hunger and poverty, and the integrity of the program must be protected, while also improving

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dietary quality and access to healthy foods to ensure that the \$74 billion²⁴ annual SNAP investment is optimized to produce the intended desirable health and economic outcomes.

IMPROVING DIET QUALITY AND ACCESS

There are several other important programs authorized in the farm bill that improve both access to healthy foods and improve healthy eating behaviors.

- The Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives (FINI) grants provide fruit and vegetable incentive purchases to SNAP beneficiaries.¹⁰ Early data from this new program shows that over 25,000 SNAP households have purchased more than half a million dollars in produce, 62% of participants purchased more fruits and vegetables, 90% report the intent to increase produce consumption, and 63% are eating less chips, cookies, and candy.²⁵
- The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) provides a fresh fruit or vegetable snack to the county's lowest-income elementary schools. Each student receives \$50 - \$75 worth of fresh produce during the school year and for some, this is the only exposure to fresh produce. This popular, easy to implement program increases consumption of all forms of fruits and vegetables by 15% in participating schools, and has shown to decrease obesity among participating students.^{26,27}
- SNAP-Ed addresses nutrition education, physical activity and obesity prevention to increase the likelihood of SNAP-Ed households making healthy diet and physical activity choices within a limited budget. 51 key indicators have been identified to consistently evaluate program effectiveness.¹⁰

THE ASSOCIATION ADVOCATES

The association advocates for increasing funding, keeping nutrition program integrity strong, exploring ways to improve dietary quality, and increasing access to healthy food options:

- Keeping Title IV and the rest of the bill together as one comprehensive farm bill and not separated into different legislation.
- Protecting and increasing SNAP benefits to help close the monthly dietary quality gap.
- Creating an enhanced pilot program within SNAP that assesses the outcome of fruit and vegetable incentive purchasing combined with the displacement of sugary drinks coupled with a robust evaluation to measure consumer purchasing, healthy food and beverage consumption, short-term health outcomes, and retailer implementation.
- Asking for report language that directs the USDA to invite applications from states to pilot approaches that increase access to healthy foods

and beverages and improve diet quality for SNAP participants, coupled with robust evaluations.

- Increasing funding for SNAP-Ed and continue to support innovative nutrition education.
- Expanding FINI grants to fund initiatives that incentivize fruit and vegetable purchase, eliminate the choice of sugary drinks, and employ effective evaluation measures.
- Expanding SNAP Electronic Benefits Transfer at farmers' markets, farm stands, green carts, and other non-traditional food retailers.
- Creating market capacity, tools, infrastructure to implement incentive programs. Possible avenues: healthy food financing, social impact bonds and the Farmers Market Promotion program.
- Maintaining funding for and preserving the integrity of the FFVP.

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