

POLICY FOCUS

The Unhealthy Consequences of Government Nutrition Initiatives

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT FROM THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Government is increasingly meddling in American food manufacturing and consumption. Many accept these measures as harmless: What's the matter with government nudging people to eat healthier?

Here is the problem: These initiatives come at a high cost in terms of higher food prices, in wasted tax dollars, and even—ironically—to our health. Taxes on specific products have been shown to fail, as people substitute equally unhealthy choices for those subject to the tax. Menu labeling requirements and marketing restrictions also fail to change consumer behavior, but increase costs and can drive small food providers out of business. Efforts to label “organic” products create the false sense that these items are somehow healthier, when all scientific evidence shows no health difference between organic and conventionally grown (or genetically modified) products. This can distract from the real need to make better food choices (more proteins and vegetables) regardless of how they are produced.

Government dietary guidance on salt, meat, and carbohydrates has been unreliable at best, and could have contributed to our growing obesity problem. Government feeding programs based on this guidance result in tremendous waste and could be leading to worse nutrition for many students.

Government should get out of the diet business. Their efforts have destroyed jobs, discouraged innovation, and lead to higher prices, all without yielding any recognizable health benefits. Americans should be trusted to decide what to eat on their own.

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Government efforts to encourage people to eat healthier can backfire on Americans:

- **Higher Food Costs:** Food prices are increasing in part because of bad government policy. For example, according to a [2014 study from Cornell University](#), food prices will grow by as much as \$500 per family per year due to mandatory GMO labeling bills now being considered in New York, Washington, and California. Menu-labeling also increases restaurants' costs and largely fail at encouraging healthier choices.
- **Wasting Tax Dollars:** Billions of taxpayer dollars are wasted on anti-obesity efforts and other ineffective programs designed to cajole Americans to eat a government-approved diet.
- **Faulty Recommendations:** Government has a poor track record on dietary guidance. For decades, the government recommended a diet rich in carbohydrates and low in cholesterol—like eggs, butter, cheese and certain shellfish—a position the government has now reversed. Bad government advice contributed to America's rise in obesity rates.
- **Eating Away Our Freedoms:** Individuals, not government bureaucrats, should decide how to eat. Government has no business trying to influence the private decision of Americans about what to put in their bodies.

MORE INFORMATION

Government uses a variety of tactics to nudge consumers to eat a healthier diet—from taxes and bans on certain ingredients, to labeling mandates and marketing restrictions, to rules for government feeding programs. All these policies seek to limit choices so that Americans will be more likely to consume government-approved items.

Sadly, these policies often fail to achieve their goals, and impose a real cost on people and American society.

Soda Taxes and Warning Labels

Soda companies are often blamed for America's high obesity rates. Yet, soda consumption has plummeted in the United States as water consumption and bottled water sales have risen. Despite this, politicians often propose taxes and other initiatives designed both to curtail soda consumption and raise revenues for anti-obesity efforts.

Yet these measures are ineffective at improving health outcomes. First, when soda is singled out for a high tax, people substitute one form of calorie-packed drink for another. [Researchers at Dartmouth University](#) witnessed this phenomenon while studying how soda taxes affect consumer choices. While soda sales did decline, consumers simply picked up another beverage—beer. Soda taxes seem to only benefit one constituency: politicians eager to fill city coffers to fund more wasteful government programs.

In Spring 2015, San Francisco's City Council announced plans to require companies put a label on sodas, saying: "WARNING: Drinking beverages with added sugar(s) contributes to obesity, diabetes, and tooth decay." San Franciscans and all Americans should be put off by such an insult to their intelligence. Our government minders ought to recognize that Americans know that sugared drinks are unhealthy, and they ought not needlessly raise the cost of these products with labels that will be ignored. Moreover, sugared drinks are already labeled with the "nutrition facts" label on the back of every soda and sugar-sweetened beverage. This label clearly shows the precise amount of sugar contained in the beverage. Just as **menu labels have been found to be ineffective** in directing people's food decisions to healthier options, these unnecessary warning labels on sugary drinks are unlikely to change people's beverage choices.

School Lunch Reforms Not Reforming Kids' Diets

Despite a massive expansion and reforms to the school lunch program in 2010, which limited the use of butter and salt in school lunches and required more green vegetables, brown rice and whole grain pasta and bread, and a \$6 billion funding increase, the school lunch program remains mismanaged and exceedingly wasteful. **According to a study conducted at Cornell University and Brigham Young University,**

in 2014, food waste reached nearly \$4 million per day because kids simply won't eat the food being served. This is supported by **figures from the School Nutrition Association**, which reports an increase in food waste due to kids throwing away whole trays of cafeteria food.

Interestingly, **according to the Government Accountability Office**, since the sweeping reforms of 2010, over one million students have left the school lunch program. While some may now be getting packed lunches from home, many of these kids are now relying on convenience stores and fast food restaurants rather than the school cafeteria for their meals. As one school's food and nutrition director **explained to a CNN reporter**, "If they aren't eating with us, they're leaving and eating junk." This at least in part accounts for the steep rise in sales at convenience stores since the school lunch reforms were enacted. **According to the National Association of Convenience Stores**, these shops saw record sales in 2013, increasing 2.4 percent to \$204 billion.

Yet, advocates for these school lunch reforms **trumpet that 90 percent of schools implemented the reforms**, while ignoring that **fewer kids are actually eating these so-called "healthier" meals**. The purpose of these reforms may have been to reduce obesity, but the reality is that they may be resulting in worse nutrition by encouraging kids to skip the school meal and rely on unhealthy snack and fast food.

FDA's Dangerous War on Salt

For years, the FDA has warned Americans that they need to reduce their salt intake to 1,500 milligrams per day (about a half-teaspoon), and **the FDA continues to signal** its intentions to regulate the amount of salt food manufacturers can use in their products.

This recommendation is unrealistic and unnecessary, and no longer supported by science. **A 2014 study from the University of Copenhagen Hospital in Denmark** concluded that this 1,500 milligram recommendation is “excessively and unrealistically low.” In a **2013 Institute of Medicine report** on Americans’ salt consumption, **the committee stated** that there’s no reason to recommend all Americans reduce their sodium levels below 2,300 milligrams a day. Even the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has taken issue with government’s salt advice. The association president **told the Washington Post**, “There is a distinct and growing lack of scientific consensus on making a single sodium consumption recommendation for all Americans.”

Encouraging Americans to reduce their salt can backfire in terms of their overall diet. As anyone who has ever dieted knows, dieting isn’t easy. While Americans work hard to reduce their intake of unhealthy food, such as carbohydrates and high-fat treats, adding unnecessary restrictions on salt—which can make healthy food taste better—makes eating nutritious food even harder.

Doctors should be trusted to advise individual Americans if their unique health

conditions require that they limit salt.

Government shouldn’t make sweeping recommendations or create regulations that are at best unnecessary and at worst harmful to consumers.

Fast Food Construction Bans

City Council members in South Los Angeles blamed fast food restaurants for the city’s high obesity rates. To solve this problem, in 2011, the Council **banned the construction of new fast food restaurants**, ostensibly to reduce the amount of fast food available to residents. As predicted, by 2015, construction of fast food restaurants declined, yet two things increased in the city: obesity and unemployment.

Certainly, eating too much unhealthy, high-fat and high-calorie food contributes to obesity. Yet what bans on fast food construction ignore are that other factors also have an effect on obesity: gender, age, genes, and other lifestyle choices. Moreover, unhealthy food can also be obtained outside of fast food restaurants, including at home.

Banning fast food restaurants also ignores the important role that they typically play in our economy, by offering young and low-skilled workers solid and steady employment. Preventing job-creating businesses from locating within a city does nothing to serve residents. Instead, it robs them of the very jobs that might put them on a path to higher employment, financial independence, and a better—and possibly healthier—life.

Needlessly Limiting Farmers

City, state and local governments are increasingly limiting the tools farmers have to grow food. Some farmers choose to grow organic produce, some choose to grow conventional crops, and still others choose to use biotech seed. Each of these farming methods can exist in cooperation with the others. Yet, many organic food activists spread misinformation about conventional and biotech crops and have enlisted powerful politicians to ban or restrict these products.

This alarmism has misled millions of consumers into believing that organic food is healthier and safer than more affordable, conventional and genetically modified food. Sound science tells us otherwise. **According to researchers at Stanford University**, there's no nutritional difference between organic and conventional foods. This year, **Oxford University found** no connection between eating organic food and lower rates of cancer. In addition, thousands of studies spanning decades have been carried out on genetically modified food, and there has never been any evidence of harm related to human or animal consumption of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Yet, alarmists persist in demanding new labeling regimes, bans and strict regulations on these types of crops. These measures would make food more expensive, and do nothing to improve Americans' health.

Battles over the origins of food can also distract Americans from the most important elements of a healthy diet. Eating an organic cookie is still eating a cookie. Eating frozen, canned, or conventionally-grown broccoli is an excellent choice, and is just as healthy as eating fresh, locally-grown organic broccoli bought at a farmers' market.

Government policies purporting to make Americans healthier have a poor track-record and come at a high cost in terms of wasted resources, higher prices, and less freedom.

Improving the Health of Americans

Government meddling doesn't work. But what does? How about allowing the market to work? It already does work in the area of food manufacturers producing healthier food.

Consumers have been demanding healthier food for decades, and the food industry is meeting that demand. One trip to the grocery store proves this. Shoppers have a wide variety of choices. In fact, it's easy to find low calorie, low fat, low salt, fresh and nutritious food. As for the food industry, in addition to **removing billions of calories from processed food products**, it is also reporting **record profits in the category of healthy snacks**. And, according to market research, healthier food consumption is **forecast to continue its rise**. The food industry is also voluntarily removing certain ingredients—such as trans fats—from their products, not because of government force, but because consumers no longer want to eat food made with trans fats. That's good news for consumers and an important lesson on the power of consumer demand over do-gooder government mandates.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can help ensure health and nutrition policy is based on sound science, not misunderstandings and alarmism!

- **Get Informed:** Learn more about food and nutrition issues. Visit:
 - The Independent Women's Forum
 - The Heritage Foundation
 - Sense about Science USA
 - The Competitive Enterprise Institute
- **Talk to Your Friends:** Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

- **Become a Leader in the Community:**

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.
- **Remain Engaged:** Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

The Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

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