

The Wingspread Conference on  
Childhood Obesity, Healthy Eating &  
Agricultural Policy

March 2007

*Conference Summary*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **The Wingspread Conference**

This document represents one of the early stages of a national discussion on the impact of federal agricultural and food policies on public health, nutrition and obesity. It also looks at how agricultural policy can contribute to healthier eating.

The ideas presented here emerged at the March 2007 Wingspread Conference on childhood obesity and agricultural policy, which was sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Healthy Eating Research program, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, and the Johnson Foundation of Racine, Wisconsin.

### **The Challenge of Childhood Obesity**

Today in the U.S., about two-thirds (65 percent) of adults and more than one-third (34 percent) of children and adolescents are overweight or obese. The direct and indirect health costs associated with obesity are estimated at \$117 billion per year nationwide.

Childhood obesity, in particular, is a public health epidemic. During the past four decades, obesity rates have soared among all age groups, increasing almost fivefold among children ages 6 to 11. Today's overweight teenagers consume between 700 and 1000 calories more per day, on average, than what is needed for growth and body function. Nearly 25 million American children and adolescents are overweight or obese, and those most affected are from low-income and certain racial/ethnic populations.

Childhood obesity involves immediate and long-term risks to health. Overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults and have a higher risk for heart disease, stroke, diabetes and certain types of cancer. Overweight children already are being diagnosed with health problems that previously were considered "adult" illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. A U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study estimates that one in three American children born in 2000 will develop diabetes in his or her lifetime; for African-American and Hispanic children, the risk is closer to one in two.

### **The Role of Agricultural Policy**

A complicated array of factors influences food consumption patterns in the United States. Some relate to the individual and are more amenable to change through education and personal decisions. These include food preferences, time availability, cooking skills and dietary knowledge. Other key factors relate more to the population as a whole, such as what foods are produced, food marketing practices, the local availability of foods and the relative prices of those foods. While they are more difficult to address, these latter and more systemic factors, if changed, could affect the eating decisions of far greater numbers of people.

Excess calorie consumption is in large part due to the added fats and sugars contained in the readily available processed food products supplied by the food industry. But these fats

and sugars are derived from commodity crops, predominantly grown by U.S. farmers. Farmers' decisions about what to grow are influenced heavily by federal agricultural policies, particularly the commodity policies that were designed to stabilize the income of farmers.

Food and agricultural policies focus on two parts of the food system: the "upstream" decisions of farmers who produce the food and the "downstream" decisions of consumers who eat the food. The U.S. Congress and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) do not often view agricultural production and nutrition as related issues. The problem, however, is that the method the USDA uses to support the agricultural economy—encouraging overproduction of certain commodity crops, driving prices below production costs, and making up the difference for farmers through government payments—has repercussions on the downstream food environment of families and children. Namely, those crops and the foods that USDA purchases for use in food assistance and school and other food distribution programs are often the ones that Americans already over-consume, despite the USDA's own dietary guidelines.

### **The Broader Benefits of a Healthy Food System**

U.S. agricultural policy has the potential to yield benefits to both the farm economy and the health of children and families. But this "win-win" can not happen by accident, and it will not happen if health concerns continue to be an afterthought in agricultural policy.

By shifting our public investments to a food system that better enables families to consume healthier diets, the federal government could help reverse the national obesity epidemic; curb the incidence of nutrition-related health problems; reduce the profound racial, ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in serious obesity-related health problems; and, potentially, realize enormous savings by averting expensive treatments for chronic diseases.

A well-crafted, health-focused food system also would carry additional benefits to farmers, communities and the environment. Higher-value specialty crops (including fruits and vegetables), locally and sustainably grown agricultural products and more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly farming systems hold great promise for increasing farm income, improving the quality of life in communities and lessening the negative influence of the food system on the environment.

## THE WINGSPREAD CONFERENCE

In March 2007, 40 leading experts on childhood obesity, nutrition, public health and agriculture met at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The Wingspread Conference, sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Healthy Eating Research program, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and the Johnson Foundation of Racine, Wisconsin, was convened to begin a discussion of the impact of federal agricultural and food policies on public health, nutrition and obesity, as well as opportunities for agricultural policies to contribute to healthier eating.

This paper summarizes some of the key issues discussed at the conference, as well as emerging opportunities to address health issues in agricultural policy. The causes of and opportunities to mitigate childhood obesity are complex. In many cases, they require a more solid research base to tease out the correlations between federal policies, food industry decisions and consumer behavior. No silver policy bullets exist for reversing the unhealthy food consumption trends and unhealthy food environments created over the past several decades. The current food system makes it very simple and affordable for consumers to obtain less healthy foods; the infrastructure does not yet exist to provide consumers with a corresponding array of affordable, healthy food options.

The Wingspread Conference occurred as the U.S. Congress initiated discussions on policies for the 2007 Farm Bill. The ideas discussed at Wingspread will provide the basis for continued policy analysis and research that will create opportunities for a more vigorous public and policy debate around future farm bills and other federal legislation.

In order to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015, a goal that the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has set, national targets and a uniformity of purpose are critical. With these long-term goals in mind, the Wingspread Conference had two overriding objectives:

- To identify areas for policy analysis and research needed to understand obesity in relation to complex and interrelated agricultural, food and health systems.

- To begin crafting obesity-prevention recommendations related to federal agricultural and food policies.

The purpose of the Wingspread Conference was not to develop new legislation, but rather to begin framing the issues and to explore policy and research options that could yield benefits to both public health and the prosperity of farmers and rural communities. The three-day conference recognized the importance of two broad principles:

- The nation's food system ought to serve the nation's physical health and well-being, as well as the economic health of the agricultural sector. Public policies generally should support, rather than hinder, a health-promoting food system.
- Agricultural policies must be realigned to help make the American diet consistent with the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, while supporting the broader public health goals of preventing obesity and related diseases.

## THE CHALLENGE OF CHILDHOOD OBESITY

The current U.S. food system is working at odds with the health of children. The sharp increase in childhood obesity over the last four decades mirrors dramatic changes in children's food environments, and these changes reflect the influence of a wide range of forces, including economics, marketing and social conditions. Childhood obesity alone carries a price tag of up to \$14 billion per year in direct health care treatment costs. In addition, research shows that obese adolescents have up to an 80 percent chance of becoming obese adults. As today's overweight children become tomorrow's overweight and obese adults, the country's health care system will be overwhelmed by the enormity of the health and medical needs of the obese if steps aren't taken to reverse this epidemic.

Few American children consume diets that meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, which are national recommendations for ensuring good health. Children's average intake of healthy foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and calcium-rich foods, is inadequate, and they typically consume far greater amounts of total fats, saturated and trans-fats, sodium and added sugars than are recommended for good health. While most children in America have diets that need improvement, children in lower-

income families are less likely to have healthy diets compared with children in higher-income families. Today's overweight teenagers consume between 700 and 1000 calories more per day, on average, than what is needed for growth and body function. For the entire U.S. population, daily caloric intake has increased by 300 calories, on average, since 1980.

Public policies help shape children's environments for both food and physical activity, such as through school lunch programs, access to energy-dense processed foods (e.g., candy and soda) in school vending machines and convenience stores, and the marketing of these foods to children. Virtually absent from public discussion thus far, however, has been any serious discussion of the role of federal agricultural policies.

## **THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURAL POLICY**

Excess calorie consumption is, in large part, due to the added fats and sugars contained in the readily available processed food products supplied by the food industry. But these fats and sugars are derived from commodity crops, predominantly grown by U.S. farmers. Farmers' decisions about what to grow are affected heavily by federal agricultural policies, particularly the commodity policies that were designed to stabilize the income of farmers.

Beginning in the 1930s, USDA programs provided a "price floor" to farmers, meaning that the price of commodities, including corn, soybeans and wheat, was guaranteed to remain above a certain level. This was accomplished through a system of grain reserves and acreage set-aside programs. By buying low and selling high, the government-operated storage facilities actually made money for taxpayers, while smoothing out price spikes that could be devastating for farmers and consumers.

However, price floors and other government policies to manage the supply of commodities proved unpopular with the food processing industry. This industry, which gained strength after World War II, reaps a benefit when market prices for commodity foods drop as low as possible—even below what it costs farmers to produce them.

Over the past 40 years, U.S. agricultural policy has gradually shifted from price floors and supply management to a "cheap food policy," whereby farmers are urged to

overproduce commodity crops. The 1996 Farm Bill, touted as “Freedom to Farm,” was the legislation that formally ended most supply management systems in the United States. Rather than remove government intervention in agriculture, however, it simply triggered a shift from price-support policies to income-support policies—i.e., subsidies. In the late 1990s, farmers suffered from market prices for their commodities far below what it cost to produce them, and the U.S. Congress responded with enormous “emergency” payments to help keep these farmers in business. These payments were fixed in law by the 2002 Farm Bill and still exist today.

Naturally, the food industry has found these low prices to be extremely attractive. Low commodity prices provide an incentive for food companies to use these commodities as ingredients in their food products, as well as for livestock producers to use them as feed. As a result, these commodities—including calorie-dense derivative products like soy oil and high-fructose corn syrup—have become prevalent in our food system.

It is in the best interest of food companies to market and distribute products that are the most profitable. Unfortunately, from a health perspective, the most profitable products tend to be highly processed foods produced from commodity grains and oilseeds, rather than fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Part of the reason for this is that crops like corn and soybeans are high-yielding, durable commodities that are plentiful and easier to use in manufacturing. But U.S. agricultural policies, particularly policies that govern the production and pricing of agricultural commodities, have had an enormous influence on the cropping decisions of farmers and the production and marketing decisions of the food industry—which subsequently affects the diets of American children.

#### **THE FARM BILL**

Since 1949, relevant government agencies and legislators have come together every five to seven years to evaluate the current state of agricultural policies, and to draw up broad ranging and comprehensive legislation: “the Farm Bill.” The last Farm Bill passed in 2002 and is scheduled for reauthorization in 2007. A typical Farm Bill is an immense piece of legislation containing provisions for everything from commodity payments to nutrition to forestry. The 2002 Farm Bill contained 10 sections, or “titles:” Commodities, Conservation, Agricultural Trade and Aid, Nutrition, Farm Credit, Rural Development, Research, Forestry, Energy and Miscellaneous.

Agricultural policies also have a profound impact on decisions by the food industry. Policies that have encouraged the overproduction of corn, for example, have induced the food industry to expand the use of corn as livestock feed and as a sweetener. USDA data show that, over the last four decades, the real prices of energy-dense foods, such as meats, fats, oils and processed foods, have decreased, while the price of fresh fruit and vegetables has skyrocketed. Consequently, energy-dense foods are more affordable for consumers than foods such as nutrient-dense fresh produce.

Public health goals have not been considered in the design of agricultural policies. But the obesity epidemic clearly suggests a need to develop integrated farm and food policies that do not compromise the effectiveness of the USDA's own dietary guidelines. The impact that agricultural policies have on the availability and accessibility of different foods is substantial, and there is a need to explore incentives that will increase the availability and accessibility of low-calorie, high-nutrient foods, such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains. This need is particularly evident in low-income communities, where fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products are less accessible and more expensive compared with the fast foods and other energy-dense, low-nutrition foods that are readily available.

The USDA has been tasked with the dual roles of supporting U.S. agricultural production and providing nutrition advice and guidance. The USDA jointly publishes with the Department of Health and Human Services the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the primary source of dietary health information for policy-makers, nutrition educators and health providers. The USDA also provides nutrition education through food assistance programs, such as the Food Stamp Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch Program.

The USDA's two important goals—support of U.S. agricultural production on the one hand and diet and nutrition on the other—do not need to be incompatible. But, for many years they have been working at cross-purposes. The crops that the USDA policies encourage farmers to produce, or that the USDA buys from farmers as surplus for use in food assistance and food distribution programs, are often the very same ones that



Americans already over-consume. Similarly, the foods that Americans should be eating more of have received much less support in terms of research, risk management and production incentives.

The disconnect between what the U.S. food system provides and what federal dietary guidelines suggest Americans should be eating is clearly exposed in the foods included in the USDA's food assistance and distribution programs. Fruits and vegetables, which are under-consumed by many Americans, are often underrepresented in these food programs. Moreover, when fruits and vegetables are included in food assistance and distribution programs, they are mostly processed rather than fresh.

People more readily make healthy food choices in environments where nutritious foods are accessible and affordable. For many children, especially those living in low-income communities, their food environments hardly meet these criteria. By their very nature, current food and agricultural policies actively discourage a wholesome diet, and may promote overweight and obesity.

## **THE BROADER BENEFITS OF A HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEM**

Creating a healthier food system also will benefit our environment, our communities and our farms. We need to look at food and agriculture through a more systemic, interdisciplinary and ecological lens through which health and nutrition are one very important focus, but not the only focus.

In addition to reducing obesity and improving health, a food system should be designed to strengthen our soil and water resources, diversify our landscapes, minimize environmental health concerns, such as exposure to synthetic chemicals, and provide economic opportunities for our farmers and communities. In other words, not only should the available foods, themselves, be healthier, so should the systems designed to produce and distribute them. The economic vitality and physical health of farmers, consumers and their communities can all reap the benefits of such a food system.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our food choices are shaped and, in many ways, constrained by the food environments that our public policies have helped to create. Agricultural policies have a powerful influence on the food products that are most easily accessible to consumers and the food products most marketed by food companies. Unfortunately, the foods that are the easiest and most affordable are often not very healthy foods. Agricultural policies can play an important role by promoting a marketplace that makes it easier for consumers to make healthier food choices and, ideally, a marketplace where the healthiest choice is the “default” or easiest option.

Good physical health and the prosperity of American farmers should go hand in hand. By shifting our investments toward a food system that enables families to consume healthier diets, the federal government could help reverse the epidemic of obesity and decrease other nutrition-related health conditions and disparities, as well as facilitate enormous potential savings in health care costs. A more health-conscious food system also would yield benefits to farmers, communities and the environment.

Only recently have the enormous public health implications of food and agricultural policies been recognized. Now we face the challenge of trying to respond to this recognition by questioning an existing food and agricultural system that has evolved over decades and has an enormous structural resistance to change. But we also have an incredible opportunity to create beneficial changes in the food systems and structures that have, for too long, been viewed as resistant to change.

The Wingspread Conference represents one of the first steps taken by the public health community to examine the relationship between farm policy and health. It also represents a start toward understanding the complex relationships among agricultural production, the food industry, and the food choices of families and children. But it is only a first step.

The public health community has a large role to play in advancing agricultural policies that support public health. Many of the Wingspread Conference funders and participants are positioned to contribute to the discovery and implementation of solutions through research, practice and policy change. For these reasons, it is an appropriate time

to articulate a new end goal—creating an agricultural and food system that reflects and advances public health interests—and to define and enact the changes that would help achieve that goal.

*The Wingspread Conference on Childhood Obesity, Healthy Eating and U.S. Agricultural Policy was planned and organized by David Wallinga and Mark Muller (Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy) and Mary Story (Healthy Eating Research, University of Minnesota). The conference planning committee included David Wallinga, Mark Muller, Mary Story, Christopher Beem, JoAnne Berkenkamp, Kelly Brownell, Linda Jo Doctor, Allen Hance, Karen Kaphingst, Prabhu Ponkshe, Ricardo Salvador, and Heather Schoonover.*

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*The web sites of the Healthy Eating Research program ([www.healthyeatingresearch.org](http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org)) and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy ([www.iatp.org](http://www.iatp.org)) will soon have the background papers, a bibliography that was prepared for the conference, a list of conference participants, and an initial set of policy and research options that were discussed during the conference.*

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