



## Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018

### Protecting Benefits and Improving Diet Quality in the Farm Bill

#### OVERVIEW

Unhealthy diets are a major cause of poor health, contributing to chronic diseases like coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and obesity.<sup>1,2</sup> Nearly half of all cardiovascular and diabetes deaths in the United States are linked to unhealthy diet, resulting in almost 1,000 deaths a day.<sup>3</sup> Public health advocates are promoted a consistent farm-to-fork policy that linked 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.<sup>4</sup>

The farm bill is a multi-year piece of legislation that comprehensively addresses agriculture, food, nutrition, hunger, and public health policies. These programs were reauthorized in 2018 and will expire in 2023. 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.

#### 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.<sup>5,6</sup>

Despite notable progress over the years, food insecurity and diet quality remain concerns for the SNAP program.<sup>7</sup> Beneficiaries report early exhaustion of monthly SNAP benefits, creating a month-end diet quality gap which can lead to decreased test scores and increased disciplinary events among school-aged children.<sup>8</sup> Receiving SNAP benefits can increase likelihood of completing high school by up to 18 percent.<sup>9</sup>

#### A STEP FORWARD FOR IMPROVING DIET QUALITY

The 2018 farm bill included several provisions that help ensure vulnerable families can put food on the table and access more fruits and vegetables.

- Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) – expands FINI by providing increased and mandatory funding and creating an education and technical assistance center that will help increase fruit and vegetable purchases and improve the nutrition of low-income families across the country.
- SNAP Nutrition Education (SNAP-Ed) – protects funding for SNAP-Ed, which empowers SNAP participants with information about food budgeting, guidance on selecting healthier food, physical activity and obesity prevention.
- Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) – calls for the TFP to be updated every five years and for purchase data to be collected from retail stores. The TFP is the basis for SNAP benefit levels and currently relies on outdated data. Regular TFP updates will align this program with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and ensure that it reflects current economic conditions.
- Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) – maintains the integrity of FFVP. FFVP targets the poorest children to get a fruit or vegetable snack in the classroom, often coupled with nutrition education. Each student receives \$50 - \$75 worth of fresh produce during the school year and for some, this is the only exposure to fresh produce.<sup>10</sup>
- SNAP Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) systems – expands and allows greater flexibility and portability for EBT use to help both retailers and participants alike.
- Fruit and Vegetable Rx Pilot Program – includes a fruit and vegetable prescription pilot to examine the effectiveness of produce prescriptions that healthcare providers write for fresh fruits and vegetables.

#### NUTRITION, HEALTH, AND THE ECONOMY

Though the bill is a good step forward, it did not do enough to address diet quality. Unhealthy diets can lead to increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes, while a diet high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes can reduce cardiovascular disease mortality rates.<sup>11</sup> 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 cardiovascular disease are expected to reach \$1.1 trillion by 2035.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>
- An unhealthy diet increases chronic disease prevalence and medical spending, imposing a tremendous economic burden, leading to lost earnings, lower job productivity, frequent absenteeism, and diminished military readiness.<sup>12,14</sup>
- Families with higher incomes and education have healthier diets and the disparity between higher and lower income families is widening over time.<sup>11</sup>
- Higher fruit and vegetable prices are associated with higher body mass indexes in young children from low- and middle-income families.<sup>15</sup>

## Fact Sheet: Protecting Benefits and Improving Dietary Quality in the Farm Bill

Seeing the direct link between diet quality and health, in 2017 the American Heart Association released a [policy paper](#) analyzing the effects of poor diet quality in the SNAP population and recommended policies aimed at addressing this issue. In addition, the Bipartisan Policy Center's SNAP Task Force created recommendations to promote healthy nutrition through public programs. The recommendations are outlined in *Leading with Nutrition: Leveraging Federal Programs for Better Health*.<sup>16</sup> These recommendations were developed by a panel of experts, including representation from the American Heart Association, and recommend prioritizing nutrition in SNAP, strengthening SNAP-Ed, aligning SNAP and Medicaid, and coordinating federal and state agencies and programs.<sup>16</sup>

### IMPROVING DIET QUALITY AND ACCESS

SNAP is the only federal feeding program without nutrition standards.<sup>15</sup> 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 sugary drinks.<sup>17,18</sup> A microsimulation study found that over five years a fruit and vegetable incentive combined with a restriction on sugary drinks would prevent 93,933 cardiovascular disease events gain 45,864 quality adjusted life years and save \$4.33 billion.<sup>19</sup>

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

SNAP has significantly contributed to addressing hunger and poverty, and the integrity of the program must be protected. Improving dietary quality and access to healthy foods must also be tenants of the program to ensure that the \$74 billion<sup>20</sup> annual SNAP investment is optimized to produce the intended desirable health and economic outcomes. A pilot similar to the microsimulation that incentivizes fruit and vegetable purchases and disincentivizes purchases of sugary drinks coupled with a robust evaluation could be one option to assess improving diet quality of program participants.

### 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. As the new farm bill is implemented, the association will continue to advocate for:

- Protecting and increasing SNAP benefits to help close the monthly dietary quality gap.
- Opposing any changes that would reduce the value of SNAP benefits or make them more difficult for qualified individuals to access.
- Creating an enhanced pilot program within SNAP that assesses the outcome of a fruit and vegetable incentive 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.
- Exploring other ways to improve diet quality and increase fruit and vegetable consumption.

<sup>1</sup> Micha R, Shulkin ML, Penalvo JL, Khatibzadeh S, Singh GM, Rao M, et al. Etiologic effects and optimal intakes of foods and nutrients for risk of cardiovascular diseases and diabetes: systematic reviews and meta-analyses from the Nutrition and Chronic Diseases Expert Group (NutriCoDE). *PLoS ONE*. 2017; 12(4):e0175149. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5407851/>

<sup>2</sup> Waters H, DeVol R. Weighing down America: the health and economic impact of obesity. Santa Monica (CA): Milken Institute; 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.milkeninstitute.org/publications/view/833>

<sup>3</sup> Micha R, Penalvo JL, Cudhea F, Imamura F, Rehm CD, Mozaffarian D. Association between dietary factors and mortality from heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes in the United States. *JAMA*. 2017; 317(9):912–24. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5852674/>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. 8th Edition. December 2015. Retrieved from: <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. USDA Boosts Healthy Food Access, Sets New Standards for SNAP Retailers. December 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pressrelease/2016/fns-001617>

<sup>6</sup> USDA Food and Nutrition Service. FACT SHEET: White House Report Highlights New Research on SNAP's Effectiveness and the Importance of Adequate Food Assistance. December 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pressrelease/2015/wh-120815>

<sup>7</sup> Executive Office of the President of the United States. Long-term benefits of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. December 2015. Retrieved from: [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/SNAP\\_report\\_final\\_nonembarqo.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/SNAP_report_final_nonembarqo.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Furman, J. New CEA Report Finds that SNAP Benefits are Crucial for Families but Sometimes Inadequate. December 2015. Retrieved from: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/12/08/new-cea-report-finds-snap-benefits-are-crucial-families-sometimes-inadequate>

<sup>9</sup> Blackmore, W. The White House Really Wants More Money for Food Stamps. December 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.takepart.com/article/2015/12/09/white-house-snap-report>

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. 2017. Retrieved from: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cn/FFVFactSheet.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin EJ, et al. Heart disease and stroke statistics—2019 update: a report from the American Heart Association. *Circulation*. 2019;139:e1–e473. doi: 10.1161/CIR.0000000000000659. Retrieved from: <https://www.ahajournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1161/CIR.0000000000000659>

<sup>12</sup> Cardiovascular Disease: A Costly Burden for America Projections Through 2035. 2017. *American Heart Association CVD Burden Report*. Retrieved from: <https://healthmetrics.heart.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Cardiovascular-Disease-A-Costly-Burden.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Lin, et al. The roles of food prices and food access in determining food purchases of low-income households. 2014. *Journal of Policy Modeling* 36.5: 938–952. Retrieved from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0161893814000696>

<sup>14</sup> American Heart Association | American Stroke Association. Farm Bill Policy and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) American Heart Association | American Stroke Association Policy Statement. 2017. Retrieved from: [https://www.heart.org/-/media/files/about-us/policy-research/prevention-nutrition/farm-bill-policy-and-snap-ucm\\_494779.pdf?la=en&hash=04f17d764de4d3c7900b45858a83a378e83d1597](https://www.heart.org/-/media/files/about-us/policy-research/prevention-nutrition/farm-bill-policy-and-snap-ucm_494779.pdf?la=en&hash=04f17d764de4d3c7900b45858a83a378e83d1597)

<sup>15</sup> Morrissey, et al. Local food prices and their associations with children's weight and food security. 2014. *Pediatrics* 133.3: 422–430. Retrieved from: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/133/3/422>

<sup>16</sup> Bipartisan Policy Center, *Leading with nutrition: leverage federal programs for better health*. 2018. Retrieved from: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BPC-Health-Leading-With-Nutrition.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Pomeranz JL, et al. The supplemental nutrition assistance program. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. September 2015. 49(3): 428–436. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4922898/>

<sup>18</sup> Garasky, et al. *Foods Typically Purchased by SNAP Households*. Prepared by IMPAQ International for USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, November 2016. Retrieved from: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/SNAPFoodsTypicallyPurchased.pdf>