

Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services

Statement of Thomas O'Connor, Acting Deputy Under Secretary  
Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services  
Before the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,  
Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, and members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity to discuss the current status of the nutrition assistance programs administered by the Department of Agriculture (USDA). I appear before you this morning as Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS). I've spent most of my career working on these important programs, and it is a privilege for me to represent our mission area before you today. However, I must emphasize that I sit before you as a career executive, not an appointed official. I anticipate that I may have to confer with Secretary Vilsack and his staff to provide you with answers on questions of policy. With that said, I look forward to our discussion and appreciate your understanding.

The focus of my remarks is the role of USDA's nutrition assistance programs in addressing overweight and obesity. The evidence is clear and overwhelming that these problems are truly reaching epidemic proportions and cut across all populations of our Nation. The latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that 66 percent of adults are overweight, and 32 percent of these are obese. Even more alarming, almost 1 in 5 children and adolescents are overweight. In the past 20 years, the percentage of children who are overweight

has doubled and the percentage of adolescents who are overweight has more than tripled. I'm sure that these figures are not new to you, and I can assure you that they have been matters of serious concern – and action – by USDA for many years.

But there is no simple solution. The immediate reasons for overweight and obesity are clear and uncomplicated: too many of us eat too much, eat too much of the wrong things, and get too little physical activity. But these seemingly simple facts are influenced by our environment, our economy, and the way we were raised. And children are a special challenge. They are subject to innumerable influences in their environment as they learn and grow into adulthood. As they develop preferences and practices that will last a lifetime, their choices are shaped by their surroundings—at home, in school, and in their wider community.

A challenge as complex as overweight and obesity cannot be solved by one agency, or indeed by government alone. The problem did not appear overnight, and it will not be solved overnight. But the responsibilities we all share to promote the Nation's health demand action now. Without it, the problem will only get worse. The Department recognizes the powerful opportunity that our mission offers to promote healthful diets, physically active lives and healthy weight for those we serve.

As we seek new ways to strengthen and improve these programs, it is important that we not lose sight of their original – and still critical – mission.

While the earliest Federal food assistance started during the Great Depression, the major growth of the nutrition assistance programs in the late 1960s and 1970s occurred in the context of clearly documented patterns of inadequate food consumption among low-income people that resulted in substantial hunger and serious malnutrition. This is not a political issue but rather one that Congress and successive Administrations have worked in a bipartisan fashion to expand these programs with the purpose of increasing access to nutritious food so that low-income people had enough to eat.

And the programs achieved remarkable success in this regard. Nutrition survey data show that the diets of the poor improved markedly between 1965 and 1978, a period that marked the nationwide expansion of the Food Stamp Program and the introduction of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The percentage of low-income households with diets that met 100 percent of the Recommended Dietary Allowances for 7 key nutrients essential to good health grew more than twice as quickly among low-income people as in the general population over that period. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) gives children the nutrition they need to develop and grow. Compared to nonparticipants, NSLP participants are more likely to consume vegetables, fruit or 100 percent juice and milk, and less likely to consume beverages other than milk or 100 percent fruit juice at lunch and through the day. In addition to providing healthful food, the presence of a School Breakfast Program means that low-income students are more likely to start their school day with a substantial breakfast, ready to learn.

Though hunger remains a significant problem in the United States, it is no longer of the

magnitude that it was before these programs were established. This change in the nutritional status of low-income Americans is a national achievement of great proportion. A critical reason for this achievement is that the largest nutrition assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) and the school meals programs are designed to respond rapidly and automatically to emerging needs in times of economic change. Benefits flow to families when the economy slows and more people apply for benefits, and the programs contract as the economy expands and household circumstances improve.

We have seen this powerful mechanism in action recently. The programs' response to the current economic crisis further demonstrates the strength of these programs. Last week, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) reported that SNAP participation now stands at an all-time high of nearly 31.8 million people. Similarly, other major nutrition assistance programs are at or near record levels of participation. While we are experiencing rapid growth, we acknowledge that there are individuals and populations our programs are not effectively reaching. USDA will continue to be committed to improving program access and outreach to underserved groups, while maintaining the fiscal integrity of those programs.

Funding for nutrition assistance programs increased by over 70 percent since the beginning of this decade, reflecting ongoing increases in participation in the major programs. As compared to fiscal year 2000, in fiscal year 2008:

- Over 11 million more low-income people received SNAP benefits each month (a 65 percent increase);

- 515 million more free and reduced-price lunches were served to low-income children (a 20 percent increase);
- 508 million more breakfasts were served to children at school (a 39 percent increase); and
- 1.5 million more women, infants, and children participated in WIC each month (a 21 percent increase).

As we discuss the efforts underway to address the problems of overweight and obesity, it is imperative that we recognize and maintain the success achieved in dramatically reducing the risk of hunger and poor nutrition in our country. Stated plainly, hunger and obesity *co-exist* in the United States, and USDA is addressing both. We are committed to administering the nutrition assistance programs to ensure access to enough food, and to the knowledge and skills needed to eat healthfully, for all those who need it.

While some have raised concerns about the role of nutrition assistance in causing weight gain, USDA is not aware of any convincing evidence that school meals or other Federal nutrition assistance programs *cause* obesity and overweight; the evidence that does exist is mixed. While some studies have shown an association between participation in certain programs and higher weight for some groups of participants, others have found no such association, or even less overweight among program participants, and none have shown a *causal* relationship.

Indeed, when one looks at both the food choices and the nutrition status of program participants and other consumers, the similarities are more striking than the differences. Our most recent analysis of nutrition monitoring data, comparing the diets of participants in SNAP,

WIC, and the school meals programs with higher income consumers show that the diets of all groups fall far short of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. All groups had very low intakes of whole grains, dark green and orange vegetables, and legumes, and high intakes of fat, saturated fat and added sugars. Similarly, consumer expenditure data suggest that SNAP participants tend to buy the same categories of foods as other consumers; differences are minor even though families at the high end of the income distribution spend over twice as much on food at home as those at the low end.

In practice, this means that efforts to promote healthy diets and active lifestyles among nutrition assistance program participants can and should be designed to address the same kinds of dietary problems that we see in the general population – an imbalance between calories consumed and expended, too much solid fat and added sugar, not enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains. We know that the nutrition assistance programs offer a unique opportunity to reach the people they serve, and we seek to leverage this opportunity through a wide-range of program-focused strategies.

For many years, we have been working to integrate science-based nutrition and physical activity promotion within and across the programs. USDA makes a major investment in nutrition education delivered through the nutrition assistance programs – over \$780 million in 2008, including over \$300 million in SNAP and over \$450 million in WIC, almost all distributed as grants to State agencies. Our Team Nutrition initiative provides nutrition education and technical assistance to help schools serve healthier meals and motivate kids to form healthy habits. The *MyPyramid for Kids* and *Eat Smart. Play Hard.* campaigns stress the need to

balance what you eat with what you do. In December 2008, FNS released a set of sixteen consumer-tested nutrition education messages, designed to be used across all nutrition assistance programs to increase consumption of fruits, vegetables or low-fat milk products and encourage development of healthy eating habits among young children. States and others have moved quickly to adopt the messages, supporting content such as tips and recipes, and implementation guidance to put these messages into practice in all of the nutrition assistance programs.

We are working with our partners who deliver nutrition education in SNAP to promote healthy food choices and physically active lifestyles within the limited resources available to these families. In 2007, FNS released *Loving Your Family, Feeding Their Future*, a comprehensive nutrition education intervention in English and Spanish to reach low-income mothers, to motivate them to improve their families' eating and physical activity behaviors. We are also preparing to launch a series of pilot projects, authorized and funded through the 2008 Farm Bill, to demonstrate and evaluate the impact of providing point-of-sale incentives on the purchase of fruits and vegetables.

We are implementing significant changes in the WIC food packages to help WIC more actively address today's greatest nutrition risks and concerns. The changes, based on recommendations from a panel of experts convened at our request by the Institute of Medicine, includes the addition of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and stronger support for breastfeeding. Breastfed babies are less likely to become overweight as they grow, and mothers who breastfeed may return to pre-pregnancy weight more easily.

We have similarly contracted with the Institute of Medicine to convene experts to develop recommendations for a comprehensive strategy to bring the school meal programs and the Child and Adult Care Food Program in line with the latest *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. We expect to receive their school meal recommendations this fall.

Because unhealthful beverage and food choices, as well as inadequate physical activity, at school undermine children's ability to learn and practice healthy eating, we have also focused on promoting healthy school nutrition environments and local school wellness policies. The HealthierUS School Challenge encourages and rewards schools that have taken steps to make it easier for kids to make healthier dietary and physical activity choices during the school day. Schools earn Gold, Silver or Bronze awards by meeting specific criteria such as offering lunches that demonstrate healthy menu planning, providing nutrition education and opportunities for physical activity to students. Over 500 schools have earned this prestigious award since its inception.

One of the most important linkages that USDA makes between agricultural producers and the health of our clients is to make fruits and vegetables an important part of nutrition assistance programs. We estimate that the programs together supported nearly \$11 billion in 2008 in fruit and vegetable consumption – through USDA's distribution to program providers, support for schools and other to buy these nutritious foods, and support for clients to purchase them in the retail marketplace.

Some of our programs have a special focus on fresh fruits and vegetables. USDA administers two farmer's markets programs, for WIC clients and low-income seniors, using these outlets for fresh, attractive fruits and vegetables to encourage consumption. And we are working with States to implement the 2008 Farm Bill provision expanding the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program snack program to low-income schools nationwide.

More generally, FNS has launched an aggressive initiative to improve the nutritional quality of our commodity programs. Schools participating in NSLP today have access to the widest choice of healthful USDA foods in history. Over the past two decades, we have worked to reduce the levels of fat, sodium, and sugar. We now offer schools more than 180 choices of quality products, including more fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low fat foods. Consider just a few examples:

- USDA pioneered a partnership with the Department of Defense to buy more than 60 types of fresh fruits and vegetables for schools. Besides fresh produce, USDA also purchases over \$180 million of canned, frozen, and dried fruits and vegetables for schools.
- USDA purchases brown rice, rolled oats, whole-wheat flour, whole-grain dry-kernel corn, and whole grain pastas; we are pursuing the purchase of whole-grain macaroni and quick-cooking brown rice.
- Most USDA canned vegetables meet the Food and Drug Administration's "healthy" standard for sodium. Our intent is to reduce the sodium content of canned vegetables even more.
- Canned fruits must be packed in light syrup, water or natural juices.

- Since 1992, USDA beef is 85-percent lean, compared to a commercial standard of 70-percent lean. We also offer several types of reduced-fat cheese, and have eliminated *trans* fats, shortening, and butter.

It is important to remember that school districts are offered a wide range of choices, and select the foods they want from USDA's foods available list. They are *never* required to accept any USDA food item they cannot effectively use or do not want to use.

Our efforts in the nutrition assistance programs complement and are integrated with our strategies to promote healthy dietary practice, healthy weight, and active lifestyles for the general public. At the center of this commitment is the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) and its integral role in nutrition policy through the development and promotion of scientific, evidence-based dietary guidance and nutrition education. The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, published jointly every 5 years by the USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), is the cornerstone of Federal nutrition policy, allowing the Federal Government to speak with one voice. We are currently in the midst of administering the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, an initiative that we will lead over the next two years, and which will serve as the core of Federal nutrition and research programs in the ensuing years.

A wide range of nutrition promotion efforts based on the *Dietary Guidelines* are already reaching the public on the Web and through other venues. *MyPyramid*, the Department's *Dietary Guidelines*-based food guidance system, has been integrated into the food marketplace through over a hundred innovative public-private partnerships to promote healthy eating and

physical activity. These partnerships exist between CNPP and food companies, health care providers, day care facilities, consumer electronics companies, youth and education organizations, research organizations, and Federal and State agencies.

MyPyramid.gov provides interactive, personalized tools to help consumers, health professionals, and nutrition educators make food and physical activity choices that follow the *Dietary Guidelines*. The *MyPyramid Menu Planner*, a state-of-the-art personal dietary assessment tool, allows users to enter their age, gender and physical activity level to obtain quick and easy appraisals of the extent to which their daily menus meet the *Dietary Guidelines* and ways to improve diet quality. The *MyPyramid Tracker* is an online diet and physical activity assessment tool that provides in depth information on diet quality and physical activity status, nutrients consumed, as well as providing nutrition messages and links to related government Web sites. Since the launch of MyPyramid.gov in 2005, public interest has been overwhelming: Over 7 billion hits, about 100 million each month, and over 3 million registrations to *MyPyramid Tracker*.

Finally, we have been working with the Ad Council on a series of public service announcements (PSAs) designed to inspire parents to adopt healthier lifestyles for their families. In February, Secretary Vilsack announced the latest set of PSAs, featuring characters from Walt Disney's classic film, Pinocchio, recently re-released on DVD. The announcements encourage parents to visit MyPyramid.gov to find the right balance to a healthy lifestyle for their children.

This is not an exhaustive list of the initiatives and strategies that USDA is pursuing to address overweight and obesity. But I hope that it offers a sense of our ongoing commitment to make sure that the programs we administer are working proactively and effectively to combat this substantial threat to our Nation's health. The nutrition assistance programs cannot offer the sole, comprehensive solution to this complex social problem, which affects people of every age, income level, and background. But the strategies we have in place can make – are making – a real difference in the lives of the children and low-income people we serve. I am confident that the new Administration intends to carry forward the commitment to stem the tide of overweight and obesity as a critical step towards a healthier future.

Madam Chairwoman, I appreciate the opportunity to make this presentation, and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.