



April 25, 2016

Secretary Tom Vilsack  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW, Room 200-A  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

On October 6, 2015, [in an agency blog post](#), you stated that the 2015 Dietary Guidelines were not the "appropriate vehicle" to address the important policy conversation about sustainability. While you acknowledged that environmental issues are critically important, the USDA has not addressed a key issue in the [2015 Scientific Report for the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee](#): the need to reduce American consumption of meat and dairy for our own health, food security and the health of the planet.

We are calling on you to follow up on this unresolved problem and initiate that public-policy conversation with a formal statement that demonstrates the impact high levels of meat and dairy consumption have on our environment and identifies the appropriate vehicles for the agency to address the situation.

Americans eat more meat and dairy per capita than almost anyone on the planet. In fact studies show that the average American consumes three to five times more protein, primarily from animals, than he or she needs. The average American consumes 55 pounds of beef, 83 pounds of chicken, and 46 pounds of pork every year, with an enormous effect on our environment:

- According to the EPA, 60 percent of the carbon footprint of the average U.S. household diet comes from meat.
- 80 percent of American agricultural land is used for raising animals and feed crops.
- In the United States, chicken production takes up more than 12 million acres of wildlife habitat.
- U.S. meat and dairy cows produce the greenhouse gas equivalent of more than 22 million cars every year.
- The beef industry alone produces 340 billion lb. CO<sub>2</sub>e. every year.
- Livestock produce 500 million tons of manure per year, most of which is untreated, leading to contaminated groundwater.
- Factory farms pollute 35,000 miles of rivers and contaminate groundwater in 17 states.
- 150 billion gallons of water are used in meat and dairy production every day.
- 80 percent of antibiotics in the United States are used on livestock, primarily for sub-therapeutic purposes.
- 37 percent of pesticide use is for the production of meat.

These numbers reflect a food system that is unsustainable for protecting our natural resources and our ability to continue to provide nutritious food for our growing population. According to the Organic Consumers Association, U.S. farmers only produce enough vegetables to serve each American 1.6 cups a day — significantly less than the current dietary recommendations of 2.5 cups a day. The USDA must support all farmers, not just the meat and dairy industry, and demonstrate that it takes its responsibility for the nation's food security, dietary health and natural resources seriously.

A legitimate path to sustainability means calling for diets lower in animal-based foods and higher in plant-based foods. Doing so would align federal policies and programs in support of sustainable food that will benefit public health and national food security. The destructive impact of the American diet cannot be mitigated by the agency's sustainability programs alone; the USDA's actions must address excessive meat and dairy consumption that's currently promoted by marketing animal products and the agency's silence on the link between food choices and sustainability.

Americans want leadership from the USDA on sustainable diets. The Scientific Report of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee — and its recommendations for sustainable diets — received an unprecedented outpouring of public support, including a statement from more than 100 environmental and health organizations, a letter of support from more than 700 health professionals, a petition that garnered 150,000 signatures, and 29,000 public comments on the report (more than any previous dietary guidelines).

Although recommendations for a sustainable diet that's lower in animal products and higher in plant-based foods were not included in the [2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), the USDA still has the opportunity to respond to the American public and the evidence in the report by acknowledging the environmental problems associated with high levels of meat and dairy consumption and by identifying concrete steps for addressing this issue.

We cannot afford to ignore this important policy conversation any longer. The USDA must create a plan for moving toward a sustainable food system using the best known environmental and dietary science. On behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity, I am available to speak with you to discuss a working plan for next steps in formulating this public agency statement and for taking action. You can reach me at (707) 888-9261 or [jmolidor@biologicaldiversity.org](mailto:jmolidor@biologicaldiversity.org). Please respond by May 15.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Molitor, Ph.D  
Senior Food Campaigner  
Center for Biological Diversity  
*TakeExtinctionOffYourPlate.com*

