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Finding Common Ground on Increasing Fruit and Vegetable Consumption

ISSUE BRIEF

Finding Common Ground is a series of issue briefs commissioned by the Healthy Farms, Healthy People Coalition to bring agriculture and health stakeholders together, building a stronger base of support for a healthy, economically viable food and farming system in the United States. Each brief highlights a food and farming issue in which agriculture and health stakeholders have shared interest.

While nutrition groups across the country are trying to make fruits and vegetables more affordable, appealing, and widely available, farmers – like all business owners – are trying to make a living. These efforts have a lot in common, but they're not always coordinated.

Making it easier for consumers to access fruits and vegetables in their neighborhoods can improve residents' health, especially in communities with limited options for buying fresh food. It also builds economic opportunities for farmers and rural communities by providing new markets for crops. Efforts to aggregate fruits and vegetables from small-scale farms helps farmers find greater demand for their products with larger retailers – and it gives consumers access to the most flavorful fruits and vegetables at the peak of ripeness.

The fruit and vegetable industry (also known as the specialty crop industry) has worked with nutrition groups (including government health agencies, food access organizations, and the anti-hunger community) to promote its products for at least two decades. This type of collaboration has focused on educating the public about the health benefits of fruits and vegetables through programs like SNAP-Ed (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Nutrition Education). But now, nutrition groups are leading efforts to help reverse obesity rates by bringing fruits and vegetables into local venues like schools, neighborhood stores, and restaurants. These initiatives are another opportunity for these two sectors to collaborate at the local and state levels.

This issue brief explores some of the challenges that farmers and the health community face in building supply and demand. Understanding these challenges is the first step toward working together.

Challenges for growers

It's important for nutrition groups to understand that what happens on the farm affects the food we see in stores. The challenges faced by growers not only threaten farmers' livelihoods but also affect what we pay for our food. For example, if a pest destroys large quantities of tomatoes, farmers could lose an entire season's worth of investment in that crop, limiting the supply and driving up prices. The higher prices are good for the farmers who did not lose their tomato crops, but they can strain the budgets of low-income consumers.

Land and water access

Agricultural land around the country is under pressure for development. But stepping up production of fruits and vegetables to meet federal recommendations for a healthy diet could require millions of acres of land and more water for crops. The vast majority of fruits and vegetables require irrigation, as opposed to relying on rainfall.¹ Water supplies have also been strained by population growth and unpredictable weather patterns in recent years.²

Natural disasters

Natural disasters pose one of the biggest threats to farmers' economic viability.³ In recent years, as many as two-thirds of U.S. counties have been declared disaster areas due to storms, extreme temperatures, drought, pests, or other natural disasters.⁴ Disasters destroy crops, which may mean farmers don't get paid for their investment of time, water, seeds, and

other inputs.⁵ Scientists predict even more extreme weather in the coming years due to climate change; these changes are expected to have a greater negative impact on fruits and vegetables than on other crops.⁶



Barriers for new farmers

The average age of a U.S. farmer is 57.⁷ Today's farmers have a wealth of knowledge and experience with growing various crops. Young farmers face many barriers to entering the field, including limited business experience, difficulty obtaining land, and limited access to financing for their farm operations.⁸

Access to labor

Almost 75 percent of farmworkers are born outside of the United States, and more than half are undocumented immigrants.⁹ Fruit and vegetable production is highly dependent on farmworkers because mechanical harvesters damage the crops and can't distinguish between ripe and unripe produce.^{10, 11} Immigration policies that make it difficult for immigrants to work legally and increased enforcement activities make farmers uncertain about whether they can find enough labor to plant and harvest their fields.¹² The current immigration policy environment is also thought to allow exploitation of farmworkers in the form of below-poverty wages and unsafe working conditions.^{13, 14} Labor shortages have been reported in states that have passed strict immigration policies, resulting in crops rotting in fields.¹⁵

Retailer consolidation

In the last 20 years, grocery store chains have merged and superstores have become more popular.¹⁶ This trend can give retailers more power to drive down prices paid to growers and to demand fees to guarantee prime placement of the product.¹⁷ Retailers' desire to work with suppliers who can provide year-round products threatens smaller growers or suppliers who only provide seasonal fruits and vegetables.¹⁸

Facts about fruit & vegetable consumption & production

Fruit and vegetable consumption in the United States is abysmally low. On average, Americans eat less than half of recommended levels of fruits and less than 60 percent of recommended levels of vegetables. These foods are important sources of fiber, vitamins, and other nutrients.¹⁹ People who eat more fruits and vegetables have lower risks of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. Fruits and vegetables also help people manage their weight.²⁰

Eighty percent of the fruits and vegetables people in this country eat are produced here on American soil. Fruits and vegetables (or "specialty crops," as they're known in the business) represent nearly 30 percent of American farming revenue and 17 percent of food spending, yet are produced on 3 percent of American farm land.²¹

Challenges for nutrition

Like the challenges faced by growers, these affect both consumers and farmers. For example, if people can't afford or even find fruits and vegetables at the stores and restaurants in their neighborhoods, they will eat more processed foods, which are convenient and appear to be less expensive – and farmers lose out on potential customers for their products.

Cost of a healthy diet

Hunger is a serious concern in the United States, with more than one in six households reporting that they didn't have enough money to buy food in 2012.²² Health experts have identified affordability as a barrier to good nutrition for low-income people and a contributor

to the obesity epidemic,²³ although some economists report that many fruits and vegetables are affordable to low-income people.²⁴ The time involved in purchasing and preparing healthy food, including using fresh foods before they spoil, may be another contributing factor.²⁵ What's more, fruits and vegetables are not marketed to the general public to the same extent as other foods. For example, less than half a percent of what food and beverage companies spent on marketing to children in 2009 went toward fruit and vegetable marketing.²⁶

Access to healthy food retail

Research shows that people who live close to supermarkets are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables.²⁷ Low-income people, people of color, and people living in rural communities have the least access to supermarkets and grocery stores.²⁸ Small food retailers like corner stores and gas stations are more prevalent in low-income areas, offer few fruits and vegetables, and tend to have higher prices than full-service retailers.^{29, 30} The presence of these stores is associated with higher rates of obesity and diabetes.³¹



Eating out

Americans on average spend 40 percent of their annual food budgets on food prepared outside the home, a proportion that appears to have grown since at least the 1970s.³² Families in particular have less time for food preparation at home now than they did 60 years ago.³³ People who eat frequently at restaurants tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables,³⁴ and restaurants report that offering fruits and vegetables can be more expensive due to preparation time and spoilage.³⁵

Who implements nutrition and agriculture programs?

Federal, state, and local governments implement programs that aim to address many of the challenges identified above. Below are some key players to learn about and work with. Nutrition and agriculture stakeholders can help these entities understand the challenges of producing, accessing, and promoting fruits and vegetables.

Federal agencies

The **U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)** oversees more than 300 agriculture and nutrition programs, including nutrition assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and programs that provide loans to farmers to purchase land or equipment.

The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** collects and reports nutrition data, including data about fruit and vegetable consumption, and provides support to communities and states in improving diets.

The **Food and Drug Administration** oversees nutrition labeling on food packages and in restaurants.

State and local agencies

State **departments of agriculture** set policies and implement marketing and research programs that regulate and promote food producers in each state. These departments also implement some federal programs, such as the Specialty Crop Block Grant program.

State **departments of education** oversee USDA child nutrition programs – such as the National School Lunch, National School Breakfast, and Child and Adult Care Food programs, as well as the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program – which schools, food banks, and other licensed facilities in turn deliver locally.



State and **local health departments** monitor nutrition and diet-related chronic disease data and promote healthy eating. These departments oversee Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and may administer other federally funded food access programs.

State and local **departments of social services/human services/public assistance** administer SNAP and SNAP-Ed, and may administer The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). In some states, health and social services are part of the same department.

Local or state **food policy councils** bring together nutrition, food, and agriculture stakeholders to assess the food system and make policy recommendations to serve community needs. They may operate independently or within the government.

County **cooperative extension offices** provide education and technical assistance to farmers and the general public on farming and gardening practices and nutrition. They may operate SNAP-Ed, in partnership with state agencies. They are funded by the USDA.

Learn More

Agriculture and health stakeholders should understand how the challenges presented above affect their communities. This common understanding can lead to conversations about potential strategies that benefit both farmers and public health. Here are some ideas for starting the conversation:

Health stakeholders can...	Agriculture stakeholders can...
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learn about farmland and crops grown in your county. www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full_Report/Census_by_State/ 2. Meet with the local cooperative extension office to learn about agriculture in the area. Find your local office here: www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/ 3. Find out if your community, county, or state has a food policy council. www.foodsecurity.org/FPC/council.html 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learn about access to retail, hunger, and other nutrition data for your county. www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas/go-to-the-atlas.aspx 2. Meet with the local health department or food bank to learn about efforts to fight hunger and promote healthy eating in the area. Find your local health department here: www.naccho.org/about/lhd/ 3. Find out if your community, county, or state has a food policy council. www.foodsecurity.org/FPC/council.html

Contact Us

The Healthy Farms, Healthy People Coalition convenes stakeholders from diverse sectors to discuss and collaborate on food and agriculture issues at the local, state, and federal level. Visit the coalition’s website for more background and up-to-date information on the issues discussed in this brief.

www.hfhpccoalition.org

ChangeLab Solutions creates innovative law and policy solutions that transform neighborhoods, cities, and states. Contact Christine Fry (cfry@changelabsolutions.org) for strategies to improve access to nourishing food for everyone.

www.changelabsolutions.org

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Endnotes

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