



## Addressing Diet Quality and Environmental Sustainability in the Farm Bill

### Overview

The farm bill is a comprehensive multi-year bill that addresses nutrition and agricultural policy issues. It is typically renewed every five years and is scheduled to be reauthorized in 2023. Nutrition is about four-fifths of the full cost of the legislation and includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other critical nutrition and feeding programs.<sup>1</sup>

As the United States continues to deal with the aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing concerns regarding the environmental impact of current dietary patterns, investments are needed in policies that will improve access to healthy food, the nutritional quality of food, diet quality, and ultimately the health of all.

### SNAP and Food Insecurity

For more than 50 years, SNAP has been vital in addressing food insecurity in the U.S. In 2021, 41.5 million people participated in SNAP, up from 35.7 million people pre-pandemic, once again proving to be an essential safety net during the pandemic and economic downturn.<sup>2</sup> The majority of SNAP benefits go to households with children, older adults, or those with disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

SNAP plays a crucial role in addressing hunger and poverty. In March 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in sudden massive job loss and an increased number of Americans at risk for food and nutrition insecurity.<sup>4</sup> To combat the effects of the pandemic, Congress authorized a temporary raise in SNAP benefits and dedicated additional funding to support the increased demand for SNAP.

The quick response of the federal government and states to increase the amount of and access to SNAP benefits is in part why food insecurity did not grow worse during the pandemic. However, research shows that SNAP benefits are often not adequate to last a family the entire month and three-fourths of benefits are exhausted by mid-month.<sup>5,6</sup> A recent study found that 61% of SNAP participants viewed the cost of healthy food as a barrier to the adequacy of SNAP benefits.<sup>7</sup>

### SNAP and Healthy Food Access

While SNAP plays an essential role in addressing food insecurity and mitigating poverty, evidence suggests that SNAP participants have worse diet quality than income-eligible non-participants, and does not address nutrition insecurity

- Studies have found that SNAP participants consumed less fruit and vegetables and more added sugars and meat/meat alternatives when compared with income-eligible non-participants.<sup>8,9</sup>
- One study found that sugary beverages accounted for approximately 12% of total daily caloric intake (258 kcal) among SNAP participants, higher than that of SNAP-eligible nonparticipants (9%, 205 kcal) and SNAP-ineligible nonparticipants (6% 153 kcal).

Unlike other federal nutrition assistance programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), or school meals, all of which have nutrition standards, SNAP does not focus on diet quality or nutrition, despite growing public support.<sup>10</sup> In addition, SNAP can set the tone in retail outlets as far as what and when items get marketed or go on sale, playing a larger role in diet quality beyond just participants.

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### Steps Forward to Improve Diet Quality in SNAP

Making changes to the SNAP program could lead to a spillover effect that improves diet quality for all Americans due to the role SNAP plays in determining what is marketed and sold in the retail environment. Programs authorized in the current or past farm bills have helped ensure that families can access healthy foods through SNAP.

- **Nutrition Incentives** – authorized in the 2008 farm bill, the **Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP) Program** established pilot projects to evaluate health and nutrition promotion in SNAP to determine if incentives provided to SNAP participants and at point-of-sale increased the purchase of fruits and vegetables. In the 2014 farm bill, the **Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives (FINI) Program** provided grants to eligible organizations to design and implement projects to increase produce purchases among families with low incomes who participated in SNAP by providing incentives at the point of purchase. The 2018 farm bill expanded FINI and renamed it the **Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP)**, authorizing funds for nutrition incentive and produce prescription programs to income-eligible consumers participating in SNAP at the point of sale. An evaluation of the second year of GusNIP shows that the program has been successful in increasing produce consumption through nutrition incentives and produce prescriptions among participants.<sup>11</sup>
- **Nutrition Education (SNAP-Ed)** – originally authorized in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids act of 2010, SNAP-Ed addresses nutrition education, physical activity, and obesity prevention and aims to increase the likelihood that SNAP-ED households will make healthy diet and physical activity choices with a limited budget. Studies have found that most states are working to implement SNAP-Ed key indicators across the individual and population levels.<sup>12,13</sup>

### Sustainability

There are increasing concerns that current U.S. food systems and dietary patterns, which are characterized by consuming too much red meat and ultra-processed foods and too few fruits and vegetables,<sup>14</sup> which have a high environmental impact and contribute to increased levels of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, water, and land usage.<sup>15</sup> The production of ultra-processed foods and beverages, as well as meat and dairy, are leading contributors to the uptake in GHG emissions, such as carbon dioxide.<sup>16</sup> If these trends continue, GHG emissions associated with food production will double by 2050.<sup>17</sup> A shift to more sustainable, nutritious diets where food is produced, packaged, transported, and consumed with the lowest environmental impact will help reduce the increased levels of GHG emissions, water, and land usage.

The sustainability of diets is influenced both by the foods comprising the diet and the way foods are produced, including levels of food waste across the supply chain. When food is wasted, all of the resources used to grow the food (e.g., pesticides, fertilizers, irrigation, water, and energy in the form of transportation) are wasted as well. This is a particular concern given the number of people who do not have access to healthy, affordable food. In addition, the nutrient density of staple crops due to current agricultural practices and climate change is declining. This decline coupled with current dietary patterns means that a significant portion of the U.S. population is deficient in key micronutrients.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. needs to provide significant investment and support to new and existing policies and programs that incorporate sustainable agricultural practices across the food system and ensure access to healthy, affordable food for all.

### The Association Advocates

The American Heart Association advocates for addressing diet quality and environmental sustainability in the farm bill. Specifically:

#### SNAP

- Increasing SNAP benefits to align with low-cost food plan to help ensure adequate benefit levels.

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- Creating an enhanced pilot program within SNAP that assesses the outcome of fruit and vegetable incentive purchasing combined with the removal of sugary drinks to evaluate the effects on consumer purchasing, healthy food and beverage consumption, short-term health outcomes, and retailer implementation, coupled with a robust evaluation.
- Include language that directs the USDA to invite applications from states to craft and evaluate pilot approaches to increase access to healthy foods and beverages and improve the diet quality for SNAP participants.
- Increasing funding for SNAP-Ed and continued support of innovative nutrition education.
- Improving the retail environment and increasing the availability and purchase of healthy foods.
- Increasing funding for and expanding the SNAP online purchasing program.

### *GusNIP*

- Expanding baseline funding to further test the GusNIP program design and capitalize on current and future investments into organizational capacity.
- Exploring options to decrease the burden of the match requirement including eliminating the match requirement altogether, reducing the match requirement for a maximum of 10 percent, or considering other federal sources of funding.
- Requiring improvements to the application process and expanded technical assistance resources to improve program access and equity.
- Developing a new mechanism for funding successful programs as they scale state or region-wide.

### *Sustainability*

- Leverage agricultural commodity subsidies to support the cultivation of diverse, nutritious food that promotes healthier and more sustainable production and consumption.
- Increasing funding for existing programs that focus on sustainability and health.
- Developing and supporting a food redistribution program to decrease food loss and waste.
- Including policies and programs, such as incentives, that focus on conservation and expand and strengthen sustainable, biodiversity-friendly agriculture practices.

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