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Center for a Livable Future

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The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) is an interdisciplinary academic center based within the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The Center engages in research, policy analysis, education, advocacy, and other activities guided by an ecological perspective that diet, food production, the environment, and public health are interwoven elements of a complex system. The Center for Agriculture and Food Systems (CAFS) at Vermont Law School is the most comprehensive law program in the nation with a focus on food, agriculture and the environment.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and urge the Secretaries of Health and Human Services and Agriculture to include in the final Guidelines the Advisory Committee's recommendations to lower red and processed meat intake and consider the environmental impact of dietary choices on food security.

At a House briefing on May 1, Dr. Robert Lawrence—the Director of the CLF—spoke about the opportunity to include sustainability and food security measures in the Dietary Guidelines. He recalled Mark Twain's musing that if we take away every eatable, drinkable, and smokable, all we'll have left is health. He posited that if Twain were to reflect on the Advisory Committee's Scientific Report, we'd be left not only with health, but with food security for our grandchildren and great grandchildren as well.

The CLF and CAFS support the methodology and findings of the Advisory Committee's systematic reviews on the health impacts and environmental outcomes associated with various dietary patterns. As discussed in the Scientific Report, current food production methods have significant environmental impact, and the capacity to produce food in the future is constrained by land use, declining soil fertility and soil loss, unsustainable water use, depletion of non-renewable resources, and over-fishing.

Given that the most health-promoting dietary patterns have also been found to have the least environmental impact, we agree with the Advisory Committee that sustainability considerations

may provide an additional rationale and motivation for following the Dietary Guidelines. Integrating health and sustainability in this manner will further strengthen efforts to national food security, as the consumption of healthy dietary patterns that include more sustainably produced foods will conserve resources for present and future generations and help ensure long-term food security for the U.S. population. To this end, we believe that sustainability should be adopted as a metric in federal nutrition programs and other messaging informed by the Dietary Guidelines and framed as a food security issue.

Given the U.S. Government's demonstrated interest in promoting food security and public health (e.g., USAID's Feed the Future programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Childhood Nutrition Act, the School Lunch program, and the Women, Infants, and Children program), it is appropriate to issue Dietary Guidelines that discuss food security measures. Following the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization's definition of sustainable diets ("a pattern of eating that promotes health and wellbeing and provides food security for the present population while sustaining human and natural resources for future generations"), sustainability has a place in discussions of food security and should play an integral role in those surrounding food security in the Dietary Guidelines.

The Advisory Committee also draws appropriate conclusions from the current evidence of the health impacts associated with red and processed meat intake. As Dr. Lawrence argued at the House Briefing, the evidence on the long-term health impacts of increased red and processed meat consumption—presented that same day by Dr. Walter Willet, Chair of the Nutrition Department at the Harvard School of Public Health—indicates there is no reason not to recommend a drastic reduction in meat consumption, save for the practicality of adopting such language in the presence of strong industrial agriculture interests.

By encouraging Americans to limit their red and processed meat consumption and consider the environmental impact of their dietary choices, the Advisory Committee took a logical, and scientifically supported, step toward the promotion of food security. They did not prioritize sustainability over nutrition or advocate for certain dietary patterns based on sustainability measures alone; rather, the Advisory Committee supported their dietary recommendations by providing evidence that the healthiest dietary patterns are also the most environmentally sustainable and likely to promote long-term food security.

The Advisory Committee's dietary recommendations remain the same whether one considers the additional food security and sustainability rationales. The decision to include food security and sustainability rationales in the final guidelines is largely a choice over whether to acknowledge, and bring to the public's attention, the evidence on the environmental impacts of food production and the implications for food security. We recommend this acknowledgment in the final guidelines because there is ample scientific evidence linking the environmental impact of dietary choices and food production methods with food security, and food security, in turn, is vital to a secure nation. Moreover, such a discussion in the Dietary Guidelines would provide additional rationale for Americans to follow the guidelines, thus supporting their own health and that of future generations.

We urge the Secretaries to support the Advisory Committee's Scientific Report and maintain the recommendations to limit red and processed meat consumption and consider the environmental impact of dietary choices on food security.

Sincerely,

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