



AMERICAN DIETETIC ASSOCIATION

*Your link to nutrition and health.* <sup>Sm</sup>

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY of HOD BACKGROUNDER:**

**Role of the Dietetics Professional in Supporting a Sustainable Food Supply that Is Healthful and Safe**

The original mega issue related to Safety of the Food and Water Supply was determined to be too broad to address in one House of Delegates dialogue session. Thus, the mega issue will be addressed by components. One component, a topic for the Fall 2005 HOD meeting, is the role of dietetics professionals in supporting a sustainable food supply that is both healthful and safe.

**MEGA ISSUES QUESTIONS:** What is the role of the dietetics professional in supporting a sustainable food supply that is healthful and safe?

**EXPECTED OUTCOMES:** 1) Dietetics professionals will recognize that sustainability is about the impact of choices on the environment, food distribution systems, quality of life, and the viability of local and international communities. 2) A series of recommendations will be developed on how dietetics professionals can actively support, promote and educate the public about ways to access and value a sustainable food supply that is healthful and safe. 3) Some consideration of the global implications of sustainability will be essential to achieving outcomes identified in 1 and 2.

Achieving a sustainable food supply is about how individual choices and advocacy impact the environment (ecology), food distribution systems, other people, and the economic success of our local and international communities. The possibilities for developing sustainable agriculture in one region are dependent on other parts of the world. Today agriculture is a global system where food is often produced on one continent and consumed on another, with resources imported from yet another. The current food system is a complicated distribution of services that moves food from where it is raised, processed, purchased, and consumed. Everyone makes decisions that affect agricultural sustainability, whether we conduct research, make policy, develop educational programs, work in agricultural businesses, or purchase food.

U.S. public policy defines sustainable agriculture encompassing broad goals, including: provide a more profitable farm income; promote environmental stewardship, including protecting and improving soil quality, reduce dependence on nonrenewable resources such as fuel and synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and minimize adverse impacts on safety, wildlife, water quality and other environment resources; and promote stable, prosperous farm families and communities. The diverse groups working toward sustainability frequently do not agree on which goals are most important.

Farming practices that are associated with sustainable agriculture include crop rotations, crop diversification, conservation tillage, integrated pest management, enhanced nutrient management, and precision agriculture, as well as organic farming or bio-engineered crops that allow production of crops in harsh conditions, or require few or no application of chemicals. In animal agriculture, methods associated with sustainability are the absence of synthetic chemicals, hormones, antibiotics, and free-range flocks and herds.

Three principle drivers that have shaped the U.S. food system in the past 100 years: technological development, the rise of consumer influence in agricultural production and the increasing integration of American farming into national and global markets. All relate to the overall environment for food and foodstuffs – production, handling, processing and consumption.

Consumers are considered an important force in the environmental movement. Their interest in environmentally friendly production practices has expanded markets for organic and other specialized products. Consumer needs and choices shape the marketplace and significantly affect the systems that serve it, but consumers have little knowledge or thought about how food is produced, handled, processed and marketed. It can be difficult to identify food origins, understand production practices and evaluate how practices influence personal, environmental and community health. Consumers wish for nutrition information and advice at the supermarket – a role that ADA members are ideally knowledgeable and trained to play.

World markets have given Americans access to buy food and foodstuffs from all parts of the world, although the vast majority of foods consumed in the United States are also produced here. The U.S. is both a major exporter and importer of food and foodstuffs. The U.S. consistently maintains trade deficits, but its agricultural trade balance generally is positive. Export sales of agricultural products contribute significantly to net farm income year in and year out.

When considering how food is produced, it is important to realize that every farm, every ranch, and even every garden is unique in soils, wind, and even how and where the sun shines. Slope of the land, weather, climate and proximity to roads and labor contribute to the uniqueness and use of every acre. And of course, every producer and every consumer is unique. Thus the food production system here and around the world is highly varied.

Since 1985, a growing portion of total dollars directed toward agriculture are spent on conservation and resource programs. Officials admit that there are still unknowns about the long term affects of some of the current food system practices on human and environmental health, and more research is needed to show the effectiveness of most practices.

U.S. public policy supports sustainable agriculture practices in part because of their potential for lower environmental and social costs than conventional agriculture. Everyone makes decisions that affect sustainability of the food system, whether we are conducting research, making policy, developing educational programs, adding value through processing or simply purchasing food.

ADA members have been interested and active in understanding consumers' needs and interests. ADA's overall body of work not only focuses on nutrition but appreciates and values food and the experience of eating. Many ADA position papers address topics related to food demand. Hunger and Environmental Nutrition and School Nutrition Services dietetic practice groups have undertaken work related to food production and the environment, and support locally produced, fresh foods and the systems that will ensure their continued availability.

On a national level, ADA has been active in several initiatives that support fresh, local, environmentally sensitive and humanely produced foods. As an organization, ADA has been active in supporting a more integrated food and agricultural system, but has taken no position on sustainable food systems. In preparation for the 2002 farm bill, the association recommended shifts in agricultural policies away from "supply push" to an informed "demand pull" model. While ADA's expertise is most recognized in areas related to food safety and nutrition, the association has directed attention to "how federal programs affect the production, processing and consumption choices made in the marketplace."

Promoting food sustainability and ecologic harmony as an essential function of the dietetics profession was first proposed more than 20 years ago by Gussow et al. However, a survey of dietetics professionals in 2003 reported that only forty-three percent had heard of sustainable agriculture. Dietetics professionals surveyed were interested in learning more, but most were not integrating issues related to sustainability into practice because of perceived barriers, including a lack of knowledge about this topic. If informed about these issues, dietetics professionals are in a position to bridge the science between field and fork and communicate the practical decision making about food choices to consumers. Consumers' interest, coupled with their general lack of knowledge, provides an opportunity for dietetics professionals to inform them about issues pertaining to sustainability.

**Pre-Meeting Activities for Delegates:**

The following three questions will be used for delegates to solicit input to the issue:

1. What questions did you have as you read the Backgrounder?
2. What skills and knowledge do dietetics professionals need to support, promote and educate the public on a sustainable food supply (give one example for support, promote and educate)?
3. What currently exists (i.e., Farmers Market, food policy council, markets, restaurants) in your locality related to a sustainable food supply?

The complete backgrounder, references and appendix are available at [www.eatright.org/Member/85\\_22575.cfm](http://www.eatright.org/Member/85_22575.cfm) on the ADA member only Web site.