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Practice and Public Health Policies

The Society of Behavioral Medicine urges passage of the PLANT (Peas, Legumes, And Nuts Today) Act

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Abstract

Current US diets negatively impact human health and the environment, while shifting toward increased intake of plant-based foods could mitigate these issues. Current food policies exacerbate these problems, necessitating a reevaluation and the implementation of new policies. The Society of Behavioral Medicine urges legislators to support the PLANT Act (H.R.5023), which would enhance production, research, and development of plant-based foods and address both health and environmental concerns.

Lay summary

Introduced to the House by Congressman James McGovern, the PLANT Act would expand opportunity for agricultural producers and would make it easier for consumers to afford and access plant-based foods.

Keywords: dietary patterns; plant-based foods; food policy; food systems; chronic disease; sustainability; climate change; greenhouse gas emissions

Implications

Practice: Increased financial support for plant-based foods can improve the affordability and accessibility of healthy and environmentally sustainable food options.
Policy: Policymakers can support human and planetary health by enacting legislation aimed at bolstering the production, research, and development of plant-based foods.
Research: Future research should be aimed at implementing structural- and system-level solutions that increase the affordability and accessibility of plant-based foods for consumers.

The Problem

Contemporary US diets, predominantly reliant on animal-based foods and processed foods, are conducive to health complications and environmental degradation. In particular, the consumption of red and processed meats has been linked to many health conditions, including heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers [1, 2]. Whole plant-based foods, such as legumes, nuts, and seeds, are rich in fiber, vitamins, and phytonutrients, and low in saturated fats; they can help manage and prevent diet-related health conditions, offering a host of health benefits including improved cardiovascular health and enhanced overall longevity [3, 4]. Environmentally, the production of plant-based foods generally requires less land and energy and emits fewer greenhouse gasses compared to the production of animal-based foods [5, 6]. A dietary shift toward plant-based foods in the USA could significantly reduce deforestation, biodiversity loss, and greenhouse gas emissions stemming from animal agriculture [7, 8]. Moreover, such a shift could also prevent a considerable number of deaths, heart disease cases, and cancer cases in adults [9, 10].

The escalating climate crisis and the unsustainable nature of current dietary patterns in the US underscore the need for immediate and substantial changes in food consumption and production practices. In light of the increasing consumer demand for plant-based foods, it is clear that the USA needs to continue investing in and promoting plant-based alternatives.

Current Policy

Given that the US food system is responsible for roughly 15% of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions [11], food policy can play a key role in facilitating needed changes. Historically, the USDA has been predominantly supportive of the meat and dairy industries (with investments exceeding $50 billion since 1995 [12]) and of commodity crops such as corn, soybeans, wheat, and rice [13, 14]. These crops often serve as feed for livestock, further intensifying the nation's reliance on animal agriculture. This support has been primarily in the form of subsidies, price supports, and insurance policies, ensuring stable and predictable incomes for farmers involved in animal agriculture and commodity crop production.

Recent research highlights the disproportionate federal financial support animal agriculture receives compared to plant-based alternatives [15]. This structural preference for resource-intensive animal products has had a cascading effect for Americans, driving dietary choices that are often misaligned with nutritional recommendations [16–18] and ecological imperatives. Moreover, the disparity in policy support between animal- and plant-based foods has limited the affordability and thus consumer access to healthier, eco-friendly food alternatives. The introduction of new policies that support research, business development, and demand-side incentives could help bolster markets for more climate-friendly foods [19, 20], such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, pulses, and nuts.

Therefore, it is imperative to reevaluate and update US food policies in order for the USA to retain its leadership role in innovative food production, cater to the evolving needs and preferences of consumers, and address the pressing environmental and health challenges posed by current food systems.

Proposed Policy

SBM urges Congress to expedite the passage of the PLANT Act (H.R.5023), which aspires to enact substantial reforms and initiatives including:

1. Establishing the Office of Plant-Based Foods and Innovative Production at the USDA.
2. Allocating increased incentives and development grants to farmers and processors of plant-based foods.
3. Updating existing USDA programs to encourage plant-based food processing facilities and export of plant-based foods.
4. Establishing a Plant Protein Innovation Initiative for improved technical assistance, grants, and development of new plant-based products.
5. Enhancing the Pulse Crop Health Initiative to address health and sustainability challenges through collaborative research about pulse crops.

This legislation is a pivotal step forward in reimagining food systems, placing equal emphasis on plant-based foods, and fostering a healthier, more sustainable future.

Recommendation to Legislators

Support the passage of the PLANT (Peas, Legumes, And Nuts Today) Act, which would bolster the production, research, and development of plant-based foods.

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Human Rights

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

This study does not involve human participants and informed consent was therefore not required.

Welfare of Animals

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Transparency Statement

No data or statistical analysis are presented in this article. The entire text of the PLANT Act can be accessed here: https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/5023.

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