



A “calories or nutrients” debate

THE STAGE IS BEING SET for major debates over hunger and nutrition in the 2018 farm bill.

The latest signal came Tuesday when Farm Credit, the national association of co-op banks that lend to farmers and agribusinesses, invited Allison Boyd, a former county extension agent in North Carolina who now works for the Farm Alliance of Baltimore, to be a speaker at its National Ag Day event at the National Press Club.

The Farm Alliance helps mostly African-American residents in inner-city Baltimore turn vacant land into small farms that produce and sell fruits and vegetables in neighborhoods and to restaurants. Farm Credit picked the alliance as one of its 100 institutions and people offering “fresh perspectives” for a vibrant agricultural and rural future.

The Obama administration and antihunger activists have described urban neighborhoods as “food deserts” because they lack big grocery stores, but Boyd said she sees the situation differently.

“In Baltimore, one in four people live in a food desert, but I don’t like that term. I prefer to call it a nutrient desert,” Boyd said.

There’s lots of “food” available in the inner city, she added, referring to the convenience stores and other outlets that sell plenty of soda pop and snack foods. It’s just not healthy.

Sonny Ramaswamy, director of the Agriculture Department’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the event’s featured speaker, picked up on Boyd’s theme. Ramaswamy, who is in charge of making USDA’s grants for agricultural research, said that “nutritional security” is “an existential threat.” One in seven Americans haven’t got enough to eat while one in six Americans must take medications for heart disease, diabetes, and other illnesses “because of the excessive amount of calories we consume,” Ramaswamy said.

This theme of calories vs. nutrients is beginning to dominate discussions of food and hunger as groups prepare for the 2018 farm bill. The House Agriculture Committee has held 12 hearings on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the new name for food stamps. Those hearings make Democrats and antihunger advocates nervous because they fear that the Republican-controlled House wants to cut benefits or turn SNAP into block grants to the states. But those hearings have provided a forum for discussion, including proposals to make it cheaper for SNAP beneficiaries to buy fruits and vegetables and to use food and better diets instead of medicine to improve health.

Under current rules, SNAP beneficiaries can buy any food except hot food, a policy that the food industry and antihunger activists have defended on the grounds that

low-income people should have the same choices as other Americans. But the bipartisan National Commission on Hunger, which was set up in the 2014 farm bill, recently recommended that Congress “enact legislation to restrict the purchase of a carefully defined list of sugar-sweetened beverages.” The commission chairs, Mariana Chilton of Drexel University and former New York City Human Resources Administration Commissioner Robert Doar, told *National Journal* that putting restrictions on the sale of sweetened beverages was not controversial among the commissioners.

“In the broad sense, the American people want SNAP to promote nutrition and healthy eating. When we have a product that is contributing to a problem as serious as obesity, it is something that should be addressed,” said Doar, who served under former Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

But despite the focus on the quality of food, the commission also noted that 5.6 percent of the American people still experience real hunger—not just wondering where their next meal will come from—and said that problem should be addressed, especially among the elderly, single-parent families with young children, diabetics, veterans and active-duty military, American Indians, former prisoners, and immigrants. The commission also recommended that continuing SNAP benefits for a time after beneficiaries find work might make them more eager to find jobs.

At a Bipartisan Policy Center event on food and nutrition last week, former Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman noted that there have been suggestions that the SNAP program be made more like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children, which limits foods to those recommended by dietitians and medical professionals. At that same event, however, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack pointed out that deciding what foods to eliminate under SNAP would be an enormous undertaking that would be subject to lobbying.

The American Farm Bureau Federation and other farm groups say the first goal for 2018 should be to keep SNAP in the farm bill because Heritage Action and other conservative groups want to split farm programs and SNAP in order to destroy both. Their concerns are understandable. But everyone involved in farm and agricultural policy should also be prepared for a detailed debate on the implications of federal policy for calories vs. nutrients. □



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