

Activities of the NNDC Subcommittee on Letters to Legislators

*by Judith Douglass, Technical Assessment Systems
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Dear Colleague:

Thank you for your interest in the Nutrient Data Bank Conference Letters to Legislators Campaign. This campaign was initiated as an effort to maintain or increase funding for USDA agencies involved in generation of food composition data.

The House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees responsible for USDA funding will be meeting this month to consider the budget for Fiscal Year 1996. We urge you to write to members of these Subcommittees as soon as possible, focusing on any members representing your state. You may also wish to write to congressional representatives and senators who are not on one of the Subcommittees.

When writing to legislators, you should follow these guidelines:

- State your purpose for writing in the first sentence (only one issue should be addressed)
- Use examples to support your position
- Be courteous
- Keep letters brief, if possible to one page

Letters should be addressed to "The Honorable <full name>" and should begin "Dear Senator <last name>:" or "Dear Congressman or Congresswoman <last name>:".

Four sample letters follow. Please feel free to customize or "mix and match" pieces from these letters, but to keep letters looking original (a better guarantee that they will be read), please do not use any sample letter in its entirety. We have also included an American Institute of Nutrition statement entitled "Importance of Research in Food Composition" to give you some additional ideas for statements to put in your letters.

Addresses, phone numbers, and fax numbers for House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittee members follow the sample letters. If you need information for contacting legislators who are not on one of the Subcommittees, please write to Judi Douglass at douglass@clark.net with the names of the legislators and/or your state and congressional district number. Your request will be answered as soon as possible. Please feel free to contact us with any additional questions.

Thank you for your support of USDA food composition activities.

Sincerely,
Judi Douglass
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Roberta Markel
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Sample Letters

Dear Congressman/Senator < >:

As the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture begins to consider USDA funding for FY 1996, I urge you to give careful consideration and full support for the portion of the President's budget proposed for nutrition monitoring and food composition programs.

I am a nutrition educator at the University of < >. In addition to teaching nutrition classes, I supervise and conduct clinical research on < >. In this work, I must estimate daily intake of several key nutrients by study subjects, and accuracy in this work is essential if we want to understand relationships between diet and health. I use nutrient composition data published electronically by USDA, and also draw on the expertise of individual researchers at the Agricultural Research Service Nutrient Data Laboratory and Nutrient Composition Laboratory to provide me with guidance in using these data. Unfortunately, these agencies have not had the resources to keep fully up-to-date on composition of foods in the food supply.

Current, accurate food composition data are needed not only by nutrition researchers in academia, but also by agencies within the federal and state governments, as I'm sure you know. Researchers at the National Institutes of Health, epidemiologists at the Center for Disease Control, administrators of feeding programs at the federal and state levels . . . these are just a very few of the types of people depending on accurate food composition data.

Please vote to fund USDA nutrient monitoring and food composition activities at the level proposed in the President's budget for FY 1996. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Dear Congressman/Senator < >:

I am writing to urge you, in your role as a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, to support the President's proposed budget for USDA nutrition monitoring and food composition activities.

I am a nutritionist working in private industry. I am employed by a consulting firm which is small in size, but which serves a wide variety of clients, including food companies, chemical companies, trade organizations, professional societies, and the federal government. We use the food composition data generated by USDA in many of the projects we conduct for our clients. We rely on those data being current and accurate. However, our food supply is ever-evolving, with new processed foods and new crop varieties appearing daily, and it takes substantial resources to provide food composition data current and accurate enough for use in research. In the 1993 GAO report, "Food Nutrition: Better Guidance Needed to Improve Reliability of USDA's Food Composition Data," increases in funding for food composition research were strongly recommended.

Please give your support to full funding of USDA nutrition monitoring and food composition activities. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Dear Congressman/Senator < >:

As funding considerations draw near, I urge you to support increased funding for USDA food composition activities in the next fiscal year.

I am part of a small business that develops nutrient analysis software. Our customers include dietitians, health and nutrition educators, and consumers interested in improving their diets. Our customers rely on our food database to analyze their patients' diets or analyze their own diets in a fast and efficient manner. Accurate and reliable food composition data are essential to our customers to help identify the role of diet and disease - during rehabilitation and even more importantly for prevention.

Our food environment is constantly changing, with new food products being developed and put on the market at a rapid pace. In order to update our database, we need an accurate and comprehensive source of information. We have relied on the USDA's nutrient databank for much of our information, however, over the years, it has not been able to keep up with the innovations in the food marketplace.

Please give your support to full funding of USDA nutrition monitoring and food composition activities. Consumers and nutrition professionals alike will be grateful for your efforts.

Sincerely,

Dear Congressman/Senator < >:

In this era of budget-cutting, I am writing to ask you to support increased funding for USDA food composition activities in the next fiscal year.

I am a dietitian. In the past, I have used nutrient data in developing materials to enable my patients to control their diseases, especially with children with inborn errors of metabolism. It seems that new products are now appearing at such a fast pace that it is impossible to keep our materials updated. We need more complete and up-to-date information for the consumer.

In your upcoming Subcommittee work on the USDA budget, please stress the importance of greatly increased funding for food composition activities. Thousands of dietitians around the country will be grateful for your efforts.

Sincerely,

Importance of Research in Food Composition

The public needs reliable information on the composition of food products. Food composition data are used in studies of diet and disease, animal experimental and human intervention studies, dietary surveys of populations, meal planning in hospitals, nursing homes and schools, and food labeling, to name a few areas. Accurate and reliable food composition data are essential to help identify the role of diet in learning about the causes of diseases, and to learn about the prevention of diet-related diseases, such as cancer, coronary heart disease, and osteoporosis.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the nation's primary source of food composition data. This federal department publishes food composition data in USDA's Agriculture Handbook No. 8 (Composition of Foods, Raw...Processed...Prepared). This annually revised resource yields information on approximately 5,300 food items and 70 nutrients, as well as other dietary components. Food industries, scientific literature, and contracts with universities and food testing laboratories are the sources for the USDA Agriculture Handbook. The USDA's Nutrient Composition Laboratory also conducts research studies to develop improved methods to analyze components such as dietary fiber, vitamin E, and particular food items.

Researchers need enhanced documentation of the data published in food composition tables. The number and source of samples, sampling and analytical procedures, and variability of nutrient values are crucial to their work to understand food composition. One example: if a dietary survey is conducted in Alaska, Hawaii, or a Pacific island, it is important to know whether the vitamin and mineral values of fruits and vegetables are representative of the growing conditions in their areas; this would determine whether further analyses of local foods are needed for computation of dietary intakes.

Laboratory data on the components of dietary fiber, sugars, fatty acids, phytoestrogens, carotenoids, tocopherols, and others are essential to answer several proposed dietary assumptions regarding the role of diet in causing various cancers. More information is also needed to answer unknowns such as heterocyclic amines produced during cooking of red meats at high temperatures. Still, the problem of missing values for various nutrients needs to be resolved.

While it is neither practical nor possible to perform analyses of all missing variables, users need guidance on when it is acceptable to impute values and what food items should be used as references. These research challenges can be resolved with the expertise of many food composition researchers and greater financial resources to develop reliable food composition data to identify the specific role of dietary factors in the causation of diseases.

Prepared by the American Institute of Nutrition, 1995

Addresses

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