

Our diets, our health, and the earth's, too

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As they have every five years since 1980, the Departments of [Agriculture and Health and Human Services](#) are preparing to issue new dietary guidelines for Americans.

Last month, the [Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee](#) submitted its report for consideration by the two federal agencies after a nearly two-year process that involved an extensive review of the latest science and hearing expert testimony on a broad range of nutrition, diet and health-related topics.

The agencies will review the report, consider comments submitted by the public and industry, and then determine which of the committee's recommendations to heed as they issue the 2010 version.

There is hope that they will keep much of the committee recommendations because, if applied by Americans in their food choices, they will do much to address leading diet-related public health problems.

Comments submitted by the [Society for Nutrition Education](#) commended several elements in the report.

For example, the report acknowledges the critical role that food environment plays in dietary choices and patterns. It includes "A Call to Action" chapter that outlines steps all Americans can take to adopt healthier lifestyles. The [USDA](#) and Health and Human Services place strong emphasis on the development of national policy and programs to help create eating and activity environments that encourage and support public health.

The report's emphasis on plant-based diets where animal foods play a less prominent role promotes both human and planetary health.

The committee's recommendations to reduce saturated fats to 7 percent of total daily calories, limit sodium to 1500 milligrams a day and avoid trans fatty acids from industrial sources are not only supported by science, but will help encourage dietary patterns that include healthy fats and limited amounts of highly processed foods.

Yes, there's much to be very happy about in the recommendations.

However the recommendation to consume two 4-ounce servings of seafood a week, while supported by evidence linking omega-3 fatty acids with heart health, ignores how seriously depleted the world's fish stocks are becoming.

The Census of Marine Life, a global network of researchers in more than 80 nations, will soon release the results of its 10-year study of the diversity, distribution and abundance of life in the oceans. The report warns that the world is in danger of running out of fish.

Thanks to our ability to develop and deploy ever-more efficient harvesting technology, humans have been

able to increase the size of the global annual fish catch from an estimated 10 million tons in 1800 to 150 million tons in 2009. This amount far exceeds what the oceans can sustain.

According to [Daniel Pauly](#), professor of fisheries science at the [University of British Columbia](#) in Canada, "The biomass of big fish in the sea has decreased by more than 95 percent over the past 100 years."

Boris Worm, a marine research ecologist and associate professor at [Dalhousie University](#) in Canada, believes that global fisheries are in crisis with 80 percent of the world's fish stocks fully exploited, over-exploited or collapsed (at less than 10 percent of their unfished biomass).

Our federal dietary guidelines can no longer be based solely on the relationship between diet and health, while ignoring their ecological implications.

Scientists believe that rebuilding global fish stocks is still possible, but only with coordinated effort that includes catch restrictions, closed areas and fishing gear modification. Dietary guidance should be an integral part of this strategy.

The [Marine Stewardship Council](#), a global organization working with fisheries, seafood companies, scientists, conservation groups and the public to promote the best environmental choice in seafood, offers such guidelines.

(Locally, both Hannaford and Price Chopper have said they are taking steps to make seafood from sustainable sources available.)

Look for its fishery certification program and seafood ecolabel when buying fish.

Human health will be short-lived if global fisheries are not protected.

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