

**Statement of the American Society for Nutrition (ASN)
Submitted to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
on Fiscal Year 2011 Funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Research Programs**

Contact: Mary Lee Watts
Director of Science and Public Affairs
American Society for Nutrition
(301) 634-7112
Mwatts@nutrition.org

The American Society for Nutrition (ASN) appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony regarding fiscal year (FY) 2011 appropriations for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and specifically, its research programs. ASN is the professional scientific society dedicated to bringing together the world's top researchers, clinical nutritionists and industry to advance our knowledge and application of nutrition to promote human and animal health. Our focus ranges from the most critical details of research to very broad societal applications. **ASN respectfully requests \$108 million in FY 2011 for the Human Nutrition Research program at the Agricultural Research Service. We request \$500 million for the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative in FY 2011, which is housed under the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).**

Basic and applied research on nutrition, food production, nutrient composition, food processing and nutrition monitoring is critical to American health and the U.S. economy. Awareness of the growing epidemic of obesity and the contribution of chronic illness to burgeoning health care costs has highlighted the need for improved information on dietary intake and improved strategies for dietary change. Demand for a safer and more nutritious food supply continues to increase. Preventable chronic diseases related to diet and physical activity cost the economy over \$117 billion annually, and this cost is predicted to rise to \$1.7 trillion in the next ten years. Nevertheless, funding for food and nutrition research at USDA over the past two decades has neither kept pace with inflation, nor the growing complexity of our food supply and public health needs. This decline in our national investment in agricultural research seriously threatens our ability to sustain the vitality of food, nutrition and agricultural research programs and in turn, threatens the future of our economy and the health of our nation.

USDA historically has been identified as the lead nutrition agency and the most important federal agency influencing U.S. dietary patterns. Through the nutrition and food assistance programs, which form roughly 60 percent of its budget, USDA has a direct influence on the dietary intake (and ultimately the health) of millions of Americans. It is important to understand better the impact of these programs on the food choices, dietary intake, and nutritional status of those vulnerable populations which they serve. Research is the key to achieving this understanding and the foundation upon which U.S. nutrition policy is built.

USDA is in full or in part responsible for the development and translation of federal dietary guidance, implementation of nutrition and food assistance programs and nutrition education; and, national nutrition monitoring. The USDA Human Nutrition Research programs ensure nutrition

policies are evidence-based, ensure we have accurate and valid research methods and databases, and promote new understanding of nutritional needs for optimal health.

ARS Human Nutrition Research Program

ASN's recommendation of \$108 million for the Human Nutrition Research program at ARS is based on three major components: a requested increase by the President for specific projects, funding needs related to national nutrition monitoring, and stabilizing, in a graded fashion, funding for the six Human Nutrition Research Centers (HNRCs).

The President's Request

ASN strongly supports the President's budget request of an additional \$6.75 million for the Human Nutrition Program under ARS. These dollars would be aimed at: supporting key research projects such as one studying whether and how American diets adhere to the Dietary Guidelines; bolstering the nutrition monitoring program, What We Eat in American (WWEIA); and, funding critical updates to www.nutrition.gov, which is maintained by the National Agricultural Library.

What We Eat in America survey

In addition to supporting the specific request made in the President's budget, ASN urges Congress to consider additional needs such as those of the What We Eat in America Survey (WWEIA). WWEIA is another example of the unique nutrition research at ARS. This program allows us to know not only what foods Americans are eating, but also how their diets directly affect their health. This survey is a partner to the National Health and Nutrition Examination and Survey (NHANES) that is run by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics. Information from the survey guides policies on food safety, food labeling, food assistance, military rations, pesticide exposure and dietary guidance. In addition to having an impact on billions of dollars in federal expenditures for nutrition assistance programs, the survey data leverages billions of private sector dollars allocated to nutrition labeling, food product development and production. For example, data collected through WWEIA provided critical information to the Institute of Medicine expert panel reviewing the WIC food package a few years ago. The panel's recommendations to USDA, based on these data, guided a revision of the food package. The changes have now been implemented and are having a positive influence on the nutritional intake of WIC participants.

Despite its enormous value and importance, WWEIA has been flat-funded at \$11.5 million for over 14 years and is in jeopardy. While we are grateful that the President proposed \$900,000 for the survey, it does not go far enough. The USDA budget for WWEIA should be increased two-fold to \$23 million to make up for losses to inflation over the years and to ensure this program can remain a state-of-the-art, 21st century data collection effort. Otherwise, we risk losing this national treasure and the essential information it provides.

Setting the Stage for a Successful Future

USDA has built a program of human nutrition research housed in six HNRCs¹ geographically disperse across the nation and affiliated with the ARS, which links producer and consumer

¹ Of the six HNRCs, three are fully administered by ARS and are located in Davis, CA, Beltsville, MD, and Grand Forks, ND. The other three are administered through cooperative agreements with Baylor University Medical Center in Houston, TX; Tufts University in Boston, MA; and, the University of Arkansas in Little Rock.

interests and forms the core of our knowledge about food and nutrition. More than a decade of flat funding at ARS for this program seriously jeopardizes the future of the centers, their important research projects, and the critical infrastructure provided by the USDA from which the HNRCs and scientists benefit. These unique centers are working closely with a wide variety of stakeholders to determine just how specific foods, food components, and physical activity can act together during specific life-stages (e.g. prior to conception, in childhood, in older adult years) to promote health and prevent disease. The HNRCs are a critical link between basic food production and processing and health, including food safety issues. Moreover, the center structure adds value by fully integrating a multitude of nutritional science disciplines that cross both traditional university department boundaries and the functional compartmentalization of conventional funding mechanisms.

In addition to supporting the specific request made in the President's budget and additional support for WWEIA, ASN urges Congress to consider a renewed commitment to the Human Nutrition Research Centers program over the next five years that would lead to a doubling of its current budget to \$180 million by FY 2015.

An important basic premise of research in the HNRCs is that many chronic diseases, such as diabetes and obesity, can be prevented by lifestyle issues, the most important of which are: consuming appropriate amounts of a well-balanced, healthful diet; and regularly engaging in adequate levels of physical activity. Using state-of-the-art facilities and a concentration of critical interdisciplinary scientific teams, the HNRCs are conducting the highest quality translational research. Also of importance are the long-term experiments involving the derivation of dietary reference intake values and nutrient requirements of individuals. Often compared to the intramural program at the National Institutes for Health, these centers tackle projects that are unlikely to be funded through other means, such as through competitive grants or by industry.

Flat-funding coupled with inflation has led to considerable funding deficits that threaten to compromise the Centers' abilities to continue their work at the level necessary to solve the significant nutrition problems facing our country. For example, the ARS HNRC located at Tufts University in Boston, MA has been flat-funded at \$15 million since 2004. The Center today would need over \$19 million in funding just to keep up with the costs of inflation over the past six years—a 28 percent increase! The other five centers have had similar flat-funding during this time period.

Beginning next year in FY 2012, the provision of approximately \$18 million in additional funds each year would result in a budget by FY 2015 that is double that of today. By making this stepwise commitment to the Human Nutrition Research program, Congress would ensure that it, through the six HNRCs, can continue current research projects, plan for the future and restore purchasing power lost to inflation over a decade of flat budgets.

Agriculture and Food Research Initiative competitive grants program

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 established the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), a new competitive grants program authorized at \$700 million annually, for research, extension, and education in support of our nation's food and agricultural systems within the newly-established National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) at USDA. This

unique program, the successor to USDA's National Research Initiative (NRI) and the Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems (IFAFS), takes research and innovation beyond the development phase, into implementation through contemporary education and extension programs.

ASN is pleased that the NIFA has identified human nutrition and specifically, childhood obesity, as a top priority. AFRI includes programs aimed to improve the nation's nutrition and health which focus on two objectives: (1) improving human health by better understanding an individual's nutrient requirements and the nutritional value of foods; and (2) promoting research on healthier food choices and lifestyles. For example, USDA-funded projects funded by the Human Nutrition and Obesity program have led to a better understanding of the behavioral and environmental factors that influence obesity, and to the development and evaluation of effective interventions. Specifically, USDA competitive grants have funded nutrition education interventions focusing on the reduction of childhood obesity in low-income families.

ASN believes the program should be funded at its full authorization level of \$700 million, but we understand that in the current fiscal climate, that is unlikely. However, with the nation and world facing unprecedented health, food security and nutrition challenges, now is the time to renew investment in our nation's agricultural research enterprise. We applaud the President's strong request of \$429 million for the program with an additional \$50 million for nutrition and obesity research, but urge Congress to take this a step further and fund AFRI at \$500 million in FY 2011. Such funding will not only position the program to achieve its full funding as we approach the next Farm Bill, but it will provide America's agriculture, food and nutrition scientists, land managers and farmers with the tools necessary to solve problems and keep the country competitive, while also protecting the natural resource base and environment, enhancing human nutrition and fostering vibrant rural communities.

The AFRI and the Human Nutrition Research Program under ARS are synergistic programs equally important to the nutrition field, because together they provide both the infrastructure and the investigator-initiated, peer-reviewed research that generates new knowledge and allows for rapid progress towards meeting national dietary needs. These programs allow USDA to make the connection between what we grow and what we eat. And through strategic nutrition monitoring, we learn more about how dietary intake affects our health.

ASN thanks your Committee for its support of the ARS and the AFRI Competitive Grants Program. If we can provide any additional information, please contact Mary Lee Watts, ASN Director of Science and Public Affairs, at (301) 634-7112 or mwatts@nutrition.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert M. Russell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Robert" and last name "Russell" clearly legible.

Robert M. Russell, MD
President, American Society for Nutrition