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May 4, 2011

Research, Education and Extension (REE)
ATTN: Karen Hunter, Senior Advisor
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 216W, Whitten Building
Washington, D.C. 20250-0110

Re: U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Draft Research, Education and Economics (REE) Mission Area Action Plan

Dear Under Secretary and Chief Scientist Woteki:

The American Society for Nutrition (ASN) appreciates the opportunity to submit comments on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) draft Research, Education and Economics (REE) Mission Area Action Plan. ASN supports the draft action plan to advance USDA's REE mission area. ASN is the preeminent professional organization for nutrition research scientists and clinicians around the world dedicated to advancing the knowledge and application of nutrition to promote human health. Our focus ranges from the most critical details of nutrition research to broad societal applications. With a membership of over 4,000 nutrition scientists, ASN is the premier research society dedicated to improving the quality of life through the science of nutrition. Our members are actively involved in USDA REE, from being USDA scientists to being the recipients of USDA competitive grants or serving as proposal reviewers.

ASN understands the importance of funding for fundamental agricultural research, which has led to the development of better food programs to feed not only the U.S, but the world, and in doing so improve overall nutrition. ASN appreciates that the USDA REE draft action plan has identified current and future challenges to the food and agricultural sector, including nutrition and childhood obesity, and that the plan recognizes that resources will need to be used intelligently and efficiently. ASN also urges USDA REE to determine accurately the resources necessary to respond to the challenges and opportunities ahead and to articulate clearly those needs to all stakeholders in order to ensure increased nutrition, food and agricultural research funding. ASN is pleased that the action plan highlights the need for collaboration and ASN urges USDA to forge public/private partnerships, as well as partnerships with other research organizations, including not-for-profit scientific organizations such as ASN. Increased public and private investment in nutrition, food and agricultural REE is essential to the health of all Americans and the U.S. economy. ASN also urges interagency partnerships, which are set forth in the action plan, to ensure that all federal agencies are a unified front against nutrition, food and agricultural challenges.

Sustained support for nutrition, food and agricultural REE is critical not only to the success of projects and therefore progress in these areas, but also to prepare the next generation of scientists by ensuring that training and careers are sustained for years to come. While the action plan notes a key focus is on students to keep the pipeline of nutrition, food and agricultural researchers flowing, ASN also recommends that USDA focus efforts on increasing the diversity of students in these important sciences.

ASN is pleased to see USDA acknowledge Nutrition and Childhood Obesity as a priority area for future focus, as well as the importance of nutrition research noted in other challenge areas, such as Local to Global Food Security, and the highlighting of nutrition monitoring as a Nutrition and Childhood Obesity strategy and action. Nutrition and health data are essential to provide critically needed evidence for decision making and to develop the most effective nutrition policy which will maximize the health of the U.S. population. Nutrition monitoring is especially important for observing nutritional and health trends in our nation's children and tracking the performance of preventive interventions. In addition, national nutrition monitoring data enables assessment of the status of 'nutrients of concern' such as Vitamin D and calcium and emerging health issues related to other nutrients, such as folate and omega 3 fatty acids. Beyond the value of nutrition monitoring for policy, nutrition monitoring data are an invaluable research resource.

ASN strongly encourages future grant funding available to support research for other important projects such as preventing additional nutrition-related diseases, revision of the DRIs, etc without exclusively focusing on obesity. The U.S. needs to maintain and enhance the potential for future scientific breakthroughs achieved in many areas of nutrition, in addition to focusing on our most pressing immediate public health concerns like obesity. To this end, supporting investigator-initiated applied and basic research on emerging diet/nutrient and health linkages is essential. Thus, a continuing emphasis should remain on obesity, but obesity should not become the sole target for USDA REE. As laid out in the strategies and actions in the action plan, improving human health requires research in many areas of nutrition, such as an individual's nutrient requirements across the life cycle, monitoring of nutrient consumption, the food environment, behavior, and determining the nutritional value of foods. Nutrition research across a broad continuum, from molecular to human metabolic to social/behavioral sciences, is necessary in order to find solutions to the many complex nutrition problems that the U.S. faces, including obesity.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the USDA draft Research, Economics and Education Mission Area Action Plan. ASN looks forward to working with the Agency to implement the USDA REE mission area action plan and in any other way deemed appropriate. Please contact Sarah Ohlhorst, MS, RD, Director of Government Relations, if ASN may provide further assistance. She can be reached at 301.634.7281 or sohlhorst@nutrition.org.

Sincerely,



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