



The Opinion Pages | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

## Let's Address the State of Food

JAN. 19, 2015

**Mark Bittman**

The state of the union, food-wise, is not good. The best evidence is that more than 46.5 million Americans are receiving SNAP benefits — formerly food stamps — a number that has not changed much since 2013, when it reached its highest level ever.

Even if you allow for fraud, which barely exists (imagine being so desperate that you'd risk imprisonment for \$130 a month; I doubt you can), the number would be far higher if everyone who was eligible knew it, if pride and stigma were not issues and if it were easier to enroll. Still, 15 percent of the nation is bad enough; it's roughly equivalent to the population of Spain.

Yet when you look at the “Your Feedback” page on the White House website, among the 16 suggested topics on what the administration should address in its last two years, the word “food” is used precisely zero times. No surprise, because President Obama has been steadfastly short-sighted about this. (He has not been blind, and compared to his predecessor he's been downright brilliant. But you need a better yardstick than W. by which to measure presidents.)

As I've written before, there are no hungry people with money. I'm all for the administration's stated goal of boosting income for the least well-off, but raising the minimum wage in minimal fashion is not going to cut it, because its value, adjusted for inflation, is only marginally up from the all-time low. Even a raise to \$10 would not bring it to its 1968 value, which is why the cry for a

national minimum of \$15 makes so much sense.

So does the establishment of a national food policy, something on which we can hope the new White House senior policy adviser for nutrition policy, Deb Eschmeyer, can focus. Because the issues that confront most Americans directly are income, food (thereby, agriculture), health and climate change. (And, of course, war, but let's leave that aside for now.)

These are all related: You can't address climate change without fixing agriculture, you can't fix health without improving diet, you can't improve diet without addressing income, and so on. The production, marketing and consumption of food is key to nearly everything. (It's one of the keys to war, too, because large-scale agriculture is dependent on control of global land, oil, minerals and water.)

The president's hands are famously tied by Congress, though not entirely. He has shown resolve on immigration, on Keystone XL and on climate change in general — his new rules on methane are tame but welcome, especially given the increasing power of loony climate-change deniers in the Senate. Although we don't know the endgame here, at least there's a welcome willingness to fight.

But we need Obama to show that same resolve in defending SNAP, because as usual the program is under siege — despite the fact that the number of people eligible for food stamps has not declined during the so-called economic recovery, which has been largely meaningless for the vast majority of Americans.

In fact, as the economy “recovers,” the corporate elite — who were rescued in 2009 after nearly self-destructing in 2008 — have become richer, while the income of most Americans has stagnated or declined. (Although real median income is up from its 2011 low, it remains down about 6 percent since 2008. Some recovery.) While raising the minimum wage and addressing income inequality are huge issues, protecting *existing* programs for the less well off is the most important battle right now.

In a similar boat are the improvements to the Child Nutrition Act (the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act), which, to President and Mrs. Obama's credit,

are powerful forces for good in the American diet, because by positively influencing eating patterns in young people you positively influence them for life. Yet these progressive dietary steps are also being attacked by Big Food and its reactionary Congressional allies. Again, it's critically important to defend this good work.

We might hear a word or two about this tonight, but I doubt it. And there are a number of other food-related themes and opportunities for progress that President Obama might mention that he will not. (I will ecstatically apologize if I'm wrong — not that this matters much.) A promise to develop a national food policy could ostensibly address all of them at once, but let me single out some crucial issues in most need of attention.

- Get antibiotics out of the food supply. The Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) voluntary guidelines for reducing those antibiotics given to animals (some 80 percent of all antibiotics in the country, and a leading factor in the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria) should be declared a failure, and a mandatory ban on the use of antibiotics in animal husbandry — with the exception of treating sick animals, of course — should be put in place.

- Tie reducing greenhouse gas emissions to reining in the industrial production of animals. Regardless of the eminently debatable percentage of GHG emissions attributed to animal production, it's significant. In my view, the administration has all but ignored this.

- Support the strongest front-of-package food labeling that the FDA can possibly develop. There are a number of directions the FDA may go with new product labeling, and one that quantifies the amount of sugar, in language people can actually understand, would be most helpful.

- Defend the menu-labeling program that's mandated under the Affordable Care Act.

In preparing to write this piece, I asked some friends and colleagues (Raj Patel, Marion Nestle, Scott Faber, Ricardo Salvador, Michael Pollan and a few others) to suggest what I might include. Nestle's response — "Make sure that no American goes hungry" — pretty much sums up the priorities of everyone

who responded. And I think it's safe to say that all of us are in at least general agreement on what I've written above. If not, I'll hear from the dissenters, trust me, and post those notes on my blog.

But let me quote Pollan on what he'd like to hear the president say:

"I am expanding the portfolio of my new senior policy adviser for nutrition policy, Deb Eschmeyer, to encompass all the policy areas that food touches: agriculture, nutritional health and environmental health. She will be charged with harmonizing our policies across these three areas, so that, for example, our agricultural policies contribute not just to the prosperity of American farmers but to the health of our people and the land."

All the president has to do tonight is recite that paragraph, and he'll have gained more credibility with advocates of good food than he's likely to do in his remaining two years in office.