Where Are the Critical Points in the Food System for Improving Public Health?

KATE CLANCY, PH.D.

ABSTRACT

At every point in the food supply chain, from farm inputs to waste recycling, elements which have contributed to a decline in the public's health can be identified. They include, as examples, plant breeding which has lowered the nutrient level in hybrids, pesticide residues in food, the manufacture of countless low nutrient density foods, increased asthma incidence due to truck exhaust, lack of supermarkets in low income areas, excessive portion sizes in restaurants, and safety concerns from food waste in landfills. However, the largest number of critical points arises from the farming and processing sectors. In general more of the farming/ranching issues relate to food safety, some of which also manifest as environmental contamination. On the processing/manufacturing side most, but not all, of the public health issues are related to nutritional quality.

The interventions needed to improve health outcomes should be instituted as soon as possible, given that the problems have existed for decades. In the longer term though, with climate change predicted to have a variety of negative effects, and the economy lagging, much more inventive, systems-oriented research, policies and solutions need to be identified and implemented to effect a truly improved and healthy US food system.