September 27, 2011

President Barack H. Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We, the undersigned researchers with expertise in nutrition, marketing, medicine, and public health, write to ask you to ensure that the Interagency Working Group (IWG) on Food Marketed to Children completes its congressionally required task to release a strong set of nutrition guidelines and marketing definitions for food marketed to children.

You and the First Lady have helped Americans understand that child nutrition and obesity are national health concerns, with 1 in 3 children either overweight or obese. While numerous factors contribute to obesity and children's poor diets, food marketing plays a key role. The Institute of Medicine's comprehensive study of 30 years of research concluded that food marketing affects children's food choices, food preferences, diets, and health.¹ The $2 billion a year that food companies spend marketing to children is testament to the fact that food marketing works.²

Many major food companies are recognizing the deleterious consequences of their marketing. Seventeen companies participate in self-regulation through the Council of Better Business Bureaus' (CBBB) Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI). While the CFBAI has prompted modest reductions in unhealthy food marketing to children and product reformulation, studies show that the vast majority of marketed products remain high in calories, saturated fat, sodium, or added sugars and/or are low in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.³⁴⁵ In 2009, with the industry’s self-regulatory program in effect, 86% of food ads seen by children featured products high in saturated fat, sugar, or sodium, down from 94% in 2003 (before self-regulation).⁶ At that rate, children will not be fully protected from unhealthy food ads until 2033.⁷

To make self-regulation more effective, the Federal Trade Commission and public health advocates have called on companies to 1) strengthen their nutrition standards for marketing to children, 2) adopt a consistent set of nutrition criteria for food marketing, and 3) expand the scope of marketing to cover all approaches aimed at children. An essential step toward helping companies address the key weaknesses in the current self-regulatory approach is for the IWG to finalize and release a clear set of marketing guidelines.
We understand that the CFBAI recently released a new set of food marketing standards. The adoption of a single set of nutrition guidelines is a positive step forward. However, the CFBAI guidelines permit many unhealthy foods to be marketed to children. For instance, though the Dietary Guidelines for Americans stresses that nutrient needs should be met primarily by consuming nutrient-dense foods, low-nutrition foods can meet the CFBAI standards if companies fortify them with small amounts of nutrients, including nutrients that are not lacking in children’s diets.

While industry has urged the Administration to abandon the IWG, we strongly urge the federal agencies to complete the process to protect children and support parents’ ability to feed them healthfully. And we are not alone in this request; we understand that the overwhelming majority of public comments submitted to the IWG support the proposed marketing principles.

We urge you and your Administration to finalize and release voluntary food marketing guidelines as the Congress requested and so many parents, health professionals, and researchers support. The nation’s children are counting on you.

Respectfully,

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