



# Recommendations to Promote Healthy Retail Food Environments

## Key Federal Policy Opportunities for the Farm Bill

October 2023

### AUTHORS:

Sara John, PhD<sup>1</sup>

Joelle Johnson, MPH<sup>1</sup>

Amy Nelms, MSW<sup>1\*</sup>

Carolyn Bresnahan, MPH<sup>2\*</sup>

Anna Claire Tucker, MPH<sup>3</sup>

Julia A Wolfson, PhD MPP<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Center for Science in the Public Interest

<sup>2</sup> Department of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

<sup>3</sup> Department of International Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

\* Affiliation at the time of writing

## Executive Summary

The retail food environment, both in-store and online, is an important driver of dietary choices and dietary quality. Diet quality in the United States (US) is low and contributes to high rates of diet-related chronic health conditions. Inequitable access to healthy food environments and unequal exposure to unhealthy food marketing contribute to persistent differences in diet quality and health outcomes based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. In January 2023, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) in partnership with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (BSPH), and Healthy Eating Research (HER), a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, convened food and beverage retailers and manufacturers, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants, and public health researchers, practitioners, and advocates. The purpose of this convening was to develop policy recommendations to support healthy food retail and healthy food marketing in-stores and online. Recommendations largely focused on opportunities that could be leveraged via SNAP and the farm bill. These recommendations, and the rationale behind them, are outlined in this report.

SNAP is a program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). It is the largest nutrition assistance program in the US, serving one in eight Americans. SNAP is authorized through the farm bill, a package of agriculture and nutrition legislation passed by Congress roughly every five years. SNAP participants receive money they can spend on foods and beverages at nearly 260,000 participating retailers around the country. All shoppers face barriers to purchasing nutritious food in a retail environment that disproportionately promotes unhealthy food products. However, retail marketing has an even greater impact on shoppers who use SNAP—SNAP participants buy more promoted products relative to nonparticipants, potentially in part due to targeted marketing.

Given the size and reach of SNAP and the large number of retailers that participate in the program, the farm bill presents an opportunity to advocate for SNAP policy changes to create health-promoting food environments in-store and online. Leveraging the farm bill and SNAP to promote healthy retail food environments is a promising strategy to improve public health and reduce differences in access across populations. Furthermore, strong policies to support healthy retail food environments could potentially make it easier for all shoppers to identify and access healthy foods and beverages in in-store and online retail food environments. The recommendations outlined in this report are grounded in the promotion of equitable food environments and were informed by evidence-based strategies in the public health literature, key takeaways from the January 2023 interdisciplinary stakeholder SNAP Healthy Retail Marketing convening, and a conceptual framework developed for this report.

In addition to policy opportunities to improve the retail food environment, we recognize that it is imperative to address the affordability of foods and improve benefit adequacy to strengthen the purchasing power of SNAP participants and provide an equitable opportunity to purchase and consume healthy meals. Therefore, we also recommend policy changes to help SNAP participants afford and access healthy foods of their choice. Without such changes, the ability of people receiving SNAP benefits to purchase healthy food will still be limited regardless of improvements to the retail food environment.

**To improve the healthfulness of the retail food environment, we recommend the following ten policy actions across six categories: 1** SNAP-authorized retailer requirements; **2** research pilots; **3** grant programs; **4** nutrition education; **5** voluntary rules; and **6** recognition programs.

## **SNAP-AUTHORIZED RETAILER REQUIREMENTS:**

- 1. Strengthen SNAP retailer stocking standards to better align with Dietary Guidelines for Americans.** To increase healthy food availability, we recommend removing the stocking standards appropriations rider, strengthening stocking standards for SNAP-authorized retailers including better alignment with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, providing a time-bound waiver for smaller retailer implementation, and offering technical assistance and grants to help smaller retailers meet new standards.
- 2. Establish healthy placement standards for SNAP retailers in-store and online.** To make it easier for shoppers to select healthier options, we recommend creating healthy placement standards for SNAP-authorized retailers to locate nutritious foods in prominent locations in-store and online. We also recommend providing a phase-in period to allow for retailer implementation and offering technical assistance and grants to assist with changes needed to comply.
- 3. Mandate that online retailers display the Nutrition Facts Panel, ingredients, and allergens.** Currently, retailers are not required to display nutrition, ingredient, and allergen information online. We recommend requiring retailers to display the same nutrition, ingredient, and allergen information that is available in stores in a manner that is easy to read, readily accessible, and free from intervening marketing information at the online point of sale. We also recommend that the SNAP EBT Modernization Technical Assistance Center provides online labeling technical support to retailers.

## RESEARCH PILOTS

- 4. Fund research pilots to identify marketing interventions that adapt the in-store and online retail environments to promote and incentivize healthier purchases.** We recommend funding pilots to explore how healthy food marketing interventions influence food purchases and consumption, retailer participation, and feasibility considerations to inform requirements and future policies, as well as understand any potential unintended consequences.

## GRANT PROGRAMS

- 5. Increase Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) funding to meet the mandatory funding threshold.** HFFI provides funds to increase access to grocery stores in communities with limited resources. The 2018 Farm Bill authorized \$25 million per year to this program but Congress has yet to appropriate more than \$5 million per year. We recommend Congress secure mandatory funding for HFFI to increase the reach and reliability of the program.
- 6. Expand nutrition incentives and promote retailer participation and healthy marketing through the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP).** GusNIP has demonstrated the ability to increase fruit and vegetable purchases by SNAP participants, but more funding is necessary to fully meet the demand and need for this program. We recommend increasing GusNIP funding and waiving the match requirement for grant applicants.
- 7. Establish a healthy marketing grant program for retailers.** We recommend establishing a new grant program for retailers to support pilot programs and evaluations of healthy marketing strategies in-store and online.

## NUTRITION EDUCATION

- 8. Expand the SNAP Education (SNAP-Ed) target audience and allowable activities so nutrition education reaches more people and is available in more retail food settings.** We recommend that USDA should re-evaluate the current definition of the SNAP-Ed target audience to allow more flexibility in the target audience and allowable activities. Additionally, allowing multi-state partnerships would facilitate SNAP-Ed programming in collaboration with online SNAP retailers.

## VOLUNTARY RULES

- 9. Create a common nutrition classification system for voluntary retailer adoption.** Consumers face a variety of messages and conflicting nutrition information when shopping in-store and online. We recommend pursuing a common nutrition classification system to clearly communicate nutrition information and support shoppers' efforts to purchase nutritious food.

## RECOGNITION PROGRAMS

- 10. Establish a USDA healthy marketing manufacturer and retailer recognition program.** To recognize retailers who are committed to creating healthier food environments, we recommend that USDA create healthy marketing criteria for manufacturers and retailers in collaboration with leading experts and organizations. These standards can then be used to establish and publicize healthy manufacturer and retailer awards and best practices.

To support the above recommendations, we also highlight key areas for research to continue to build the evidence base for policies and strategies to promote healthier food choices when shopping in-store and online. Finally, we highlight key considerations for any policy, voluntary action, or incentive strategy to improve in-store or online retail food environments to ensure effective and equitable implementation. These considerations include prioritizing health equity during policy

development and implementation, understanding that there is no one-size fits all solution and that multiple, integrated approaches will be needed, and prioritizing engagement and getting 'buy-in' from multiple stakeholders throughout the process.

In-store and online retail food environments are important determinants of food and beverage choices, dietary quality, and ultimately diet-related health outcomes. Leveraging SNAP and the farm bill to improve retail food environments, investing in research, and strengthening SNAP benefits will help promote healthy diets and improve health equity. The recommendations included in this report can help make progress towards creating environments in which it is easier for all shoppers, and SNAP participants in particular, to make healthy food and beverage choices.

**[VIEW THE FULL REPORT HERE.](#)**