

Policy Focus

Sour on Sugar-Cereal Restrictions

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT FROM THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Government is increasingly micromanaging food producers in the name of promoting better health, particularly among children. These efforts range from prohibiting certain foods on the school lunch line, to banning toys in happy meals, to telling food manufacturers what products they can and cannot advertize.

Cereal companies appear to be a new target for more regulations and mandates. A November 2011 report released by an environmental advocacy organization warned parents of the presence of sugar in cereal. This report generated a number of dramatic headlines about children's poor nutrition, but ignored the real facts about trends in childhood obesity and the governments' limited ability to influence how Americans eat.

Reasonable parents understand it is their responsibility—not governments'—to make healthy choices for their children. And parents have more choices than ever before because cereal companies have responded to a variety of health concerns and dietary restrictions. When it comes to cereals, parents can now select gluten and nut-free cereals, as well as those with reduced fat, sugar and carbohydrates. In other words, parents have plenty of healthy options for their children.

Government has no business targeting one type of ingredient, or one industry, for regulation. Such efforts are bound to fail and are an inappropriate government intrusion into Americans' private lives.

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Some assume government efforts to encourage healthy eating are harmless, but there are many reasons to support rolling back food regulations:

- **Raising Food Prices:** As food manufacturers overhaul their products and marketing strategies to satisfy the government, these costs will simply be passed on to the consumer.
- **Costing Jobs:** These latest food regulations could cost the food industry upwards of 74,000 jobs and billions of dollars in lost revenue.
- **Regulations Don't Work:** Studies show government efforts to persuade Americans to eat better fail. Regulating certain ingredients—like sugar—won't improve Americans' health and could backfire.
- **Basic Freedoms:** Government has no business intervening in this private aspect of life. Businesses are already responding to consumer demand by offering kid-friendly, but lower-sugar cereals.

Research confirms parents—not government policies—are key to making kids healthier. If we really want healthy kids, parents must regain control of feeding their children and teach them about healthy food, proper portioning, and the importance of activity, exercise, and self-control.

MORE INFORMATION

Government's Push to Micromanage What Americans Eat

The past few years have witnessed an aggressive expansion of government's control of the food industry. Efforts have ranged from requiring chain restaurants and vending machines to post calorie information to a massive food safety bill that added vast new powers to the Food and Drug Administration.

More recently, the federal government has signaled its interest in regulating certain food ingredients, like salt and sugar. This builds on similar state and local government efforts, which include outlawing trans-fats, taxing sodas, and banning toys in fast food meals. Many of these efforts have been advanced in the name of improving children's eating habits.

In 2011, a government working group released a [preliminary proposal](#) aimed at limiting the marketing of food products to children and teens. According to the proposal, food manufacturers should encourage children to eat healthy and minimize the consumption of foods “that could have a negative impact on health or weight—specifically, sodium, saturated fat, trans-fat, and added sugars...”

The working group also created a set of nutrition principles that it recommends the food industry follow. Yet these “nutrition principles” contradicted the guidelines set forth in the USDA’s own Dietary Guidelines. The list of restricted items under the new nutrition principles (yet allowable under the Dietary Guidelines) includes: pretzels, yogurt, bottled water, oatmeal and rice. In fact, of America’s 100 most popular food items, only twelve could be advertized under these new standards.

Perhaps this government overreach could be excused if such regulations had proven effective in keeping kids healthy, but even the White House acknowledges that these regulations are unlikely to work. A White House [report](#) on childhood obesity echoed the U.S. Institute of Medicine’s findings that “a causal link between marketing and increasing childhood obesity rates has yet to be firmly established.”

Studies show that efficacy problems persist within every category of food regulation. For instance, targeting sodas is popular among politicians eager to appear concerned about childhood obesity. Yet a recent [study out of the University of Chicago](#) found that taking soda machines out of schools has failed to reduce soda consumption or childhood obesity rates. Another study on the efficacy of soda taxes showed they have no impact on the obese, because obese consumers generally drink diet colas (which aren’t taxed).

While government regulators have embraced new menu labeling mandates, [multiple studies](#) both here and in the [United Kingdom](#) (where menu labeling has been mandatory for a decade) show people do not choose healthier items even when presented with calorie information. Despite the clear evidence that these regulations don’t work, the federal government now requires chain restaurants to print calorie information on their menus thanks to a provision slipped into ObamaCare.

The Blame Game: Targeting Sugar Cereal

The food nannies appear to have identified a new target for government oversight: cereals that contain sugar. Leading the call for regulations is a left-leaning advocacy organization called the Environmental Working Group (EWG), which issued a [report](#) in November arguing children’s breakfast cereals aren’t healthy enough. Yet, EWG’s measure of if a cereal was “healthy” was the federal government’s widely panned and overly-prescriptive “proposed nutrition principles”—the same principles that consider milk, cheese, bottled water and most bread products unhealthy for kids.

In fact, the EWG’s list of the 10 worst children’s cereals is based on one ingredient: sugar. For example, the report names Kellogg’s Honey Smacks as one of the cereals with the highest sugar content. They ignore the other items contained in this kid-friendly cereal: Vitamins A, C, D, E and K, as well as B6 and B12. The cereal

also contains fiber and protein, as well as needed minerals like calcium, iron, and magnesium. Also important is what this cereal does not contain: it contains minimal fat (only .5 grams per serving, which is one percent of the daily requirement) and relatively few carbohydrates.

Research also shows that cereal encourages children to ingest milk—consumption of which is down to record lows ([according to the USDA](#), Americans now get half the amount of milk consumed in 1945). And while the EWG report cites two studies that show children who consume sugary cereals have trouble concentrating, [another study](#) reveals that children who “demonstrated a consistent cereal eating pattern had healthier body weights and lower BMI’s than those who did not.”

Parents understand that sometimes it can be difficult to get a child to eat on a schedule. The very model of perfect child-rearing, Mary Poppins, put it perfectly when she said “a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.” In this case, the medicine is milk, fiber, vitamins and other helpful things for a growing body.

Those who would seek to limit access to sugar cereal presume that parents would then feed children a healthier alternative, such as a whole grain cereal with less sugar content. Yet it is just as likely (and perhaps more likely) that children will end up consuming less healthy breakfast options (or not breakfast at all) absent the option of cereal containing sugar.

A Call For Strong Parents

While childhood obesity is certainly an issue worth discussing, it is also worth noting that the rhetoric surrounding this country’s so-called obesity “epidemic” does not match the statistics.

The rather less dramatic truth is the vast majority of children in this country are perfectly healthy and obesity rates haven’t budged in over 10 years. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control’s [Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Children: National Health Interview Survey, 2010](#), “most U.S. children aged 17 years and under had excellent or very good health.”

Despite this, Washington bureaucrats are determined to find that magic bullet to solve the obesity “epidemic.” Their faith in regulations and other government initiatives to prevent children from obtaining certain food and beverages ignores the reality that food intake is only a portion of what determines a child’s weight. Economic status, genetics, race, and sex all contribute to a child’s likelihood of becoming obese, making it difficult to create policies that solve the problem. However, there is some evidence that one thing makes a very big difference to the health of children: strong parenting.

In 2010, Ohio State University [found](#) that only three things contribute to healthy children: sitting down for family dinners, getting more sleep at night and watching less television. Interestingly, these routines even worked for children at high risk of

obesity (for reasons like having a family history of the condition, being raised in a low-income household or growing up in a single-parent home).

A 2007 Northwestern University study [found](#) that inadequate sleep put children at higher risk of being overweight, and just one extra hour of sleep reduces the risk of being overweight in young children.

Most recently, an [Australian study](#) involving overweight children found “the greatest [weight loss] effects were achieved through inclusion of a parent-centered diet program, indicating the importance of targeting parents within treatment...” In other words, the children who experienced the greatest weight loss were the children whose parents were actively involved in their food decisions.

These studies suggest that the key to controlling childhood obesity really has little to do with government bans and regulations. Rather, parents who take an active role in their children’s health, nutrition and food decisions (including purchasing the cereal that best suits their child) are the key to keeping kids healthy.

At the heart of the food regulation debate is the issue of personal choice and responsibility. Those who favor greater regulation simply don’t trust consumers to make the “right” choices and want enlightened government bureaucrats to circumscribe the choices available to American families.

Americans who appreciate basic freedom and government’s limited role understand that

individuals and parents should decide what their children eat. Delegating such decisions to government represents a profound loss of autonomy and step toward an intrusive nanny state.

Big and Small Cereal Companies Already Answer Consumer Demand

While food manufacturers do produce cereals that contain sugar; they also produce many healthy alternatives. For instance, while Kellogg’s produces Honey Smacks (identified in the EWG report as a high-sugar cereal) the company also produces such diet-friendly cereals as Special K, Cripix and Corn Flakes. Quaker Oats is another company that provides consumers with multiple cereal choices. While the company produces Capt’n Crunch (also on the EWG list), the company also produces oatmeal.

Cereal companies are constantly innovating and creating new products to give customers more choices. But these large cereal companies can’t accommodate every dietary need. And those holes in the market create some excellent opportunities for smaller companies—like Bear Naked cereal company, which produces natural, vegan and kosher cereals. This company thrived because a larger cereal company had not yet filled this particular niche market, thus creating a business opportunity for this smaller-scale, start-up cereal company.

More importantly, all food companies are already required to provide the nutrition information directly on the cereal packages. This makes it easy for parents to identify the best cereal for their kids’ needs.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can help tell Washington to preserve food freedom!

- **Get Informed:** Get the facts. Visit:
 - The Independent Women's Forum
(www.iwf.org)
 - The Center for Consumer Freedom
(www.consumerfreedom.com)
 - My Food. My Choice!
(www.myfoodmychoice.org)
- **Talk to Your Friends:** Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what is going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

- **Become a Leader in the Community:** Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.
- **Remain Engaged:** Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your national, state, and local leaders know your opinions!

ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

The Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

We rely on the support of people like you! Please visit us on our website www.iwf.org to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

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