

POSITION STATEMENT:

SBM Urges Passage of the PLANT (Peas, Legumes, And Nuts Today) Act

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SUMMARY STATEMENT

The Society of Behavioral Medicine supports the passage of the PLANT Act (H.R.5023), legislation aimed at bolstering the production, research, and development of plant-based foods.



THE PROBLEM

Contemporary U.S. diets, predominantly reliant on animal-based foods and processed foods, are conducive to health complications and environmental degradation. In particular, the consumption of red and processed meats has been linked to many health conditions, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers^{1,2}. Whole plant-based foods, such as legumes, nuts, and seeds, are rich in fiber, vitamins, and phytonutrients, and low in saturated fats; they can help manage and prevent diet-related health conditions, offering a host of health benefits including improved cardiovascular health and enhanced overall longevity^{3,4}. Environmentally, the production of plant-based foods generally requires less land and energy and emits fewer greenhouse gasses compared to the production of animal-based foods^{5,6}. A dietary shift towards plant-based foods in the U.S. could significantly reduce deforestation, biodiversity loss, and greenhouse gas emissions stemming from animal agriculture^{7,8}. Moreover, such a shift could also prevent a considerable number of deaths, heart disease cases, and cancer cases in adults^{9,10}.

The escalating climate crisis and the unsustainable nature of current dietary patterns in the U.S. underscore the need for immediate and substantial changes in food consumption and production practices. In light of the increasing consumer demand for plant-based foods, it is clear that the U.S. needs to continue investing in and promoting plant-based alternatives.

Given that the U.S. food system is responsible for roughly 15% of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions¹¹, food policy can play a key role in facilitating needed changes.

CURRENT POLICY

Historically, the USDA has been predominantly supportive of the meat and dairy industries (with investments exceeding \$50 billion since 1995¹²) and of commodity crops such as corn, soybeans, wheat, and rice^{13,14}. These crops often serve as feed for livestock, further intensifying the nation's reliance on animal agriculture. This support has been primarily in the form of subsidies, price supports, and insurance policies, ensuring stable and predictable incomes for farmers involved in animal agriculture and commodity crop production.

Recent research highlights the disproportionate federal financial support animal agriculture receives compared to plant-based alternatives¹⁵. This structural preference for resource-intensive animal products has had a cascading effect for Americans, driving dietary choices that are often misaligned with nutritional recommendations¹⁶⁻¹⁸ and ecological imperatives. Moreover, the disparity in policy support between animal- and plant-based foods has limited the affordability and thus consumer access to healthier, eco-friendly food alternatives. The introduction of new policies that support research, business development, and demand-side incentives could help bolster markets for more climate-friendly foods¹⁹⁻²⁰, such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, pulses, and nuts.

Therefore, it is imperative to re-evaluate and update U.S. food policies in order for the U.S. to retain its leadership role in innovative food production, cater to the evolving needs and preferences of consumers, and address the pressing environmental and health challenges posed by current food systems.

*Endorsing organizations do not write or have any control over position statement content.
All authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.*

The PLANT Act (H.R.5023) aspires to enact substantial reforms and initiatives including:

1. Establishing the Office of Plant-Based Foods and Innovative Production at the USDA.
2. Allocating increased incentives and development grants to farmers and processors of plant-based foods.
3. Updating existing USDA programs to encourage plant-based food processing facilities and export of plant-based foods.
4. Establishing a Plant Protein Innovation Initiative for improved technical assistance, grants, and development of new plant-based products.
5. Enhancing the Pulse Crop Health Initiative to address health and sustainability challenges through collaborative research about pulse crops.

SBM urges Congress to expedite the passage of the PLANT Act. This legislation is a pivotal step forward in reimagining food systems, placing equal emphasis on plant-based foods, and fostering a healthier, more sustainable future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support the passage of the PLANT (Peas, Legumes, And Nuts Today) Act, which would bolster the production, research, and development of plant-based foods.

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ENDORSEMENTS

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