

Court says Conflict of Interest on USDA Committee

A U.S. District Court judge ruled last week that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) violated federal laws when they selected individuals with known financial ties to the meat, dairy and egg industry to serve as members to the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee.

The committee was in charge of drawing up the latest nutritional guidelines that comprise the USDA's Food Pyramid and serve as a basis for all federally funded food programs in the United States.

A Washington-based advocacy group called Physicians for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) had filed the lawsuit last December. Representing more than 5,000 doctors, PCRM asserts that the current food pyramid is unhealthy because it promotes the consumption of meat, eggs and dairy as part of the daily diet, and is racially biased since many nonwhite races are lactose intolerant and more susceptible to diet-related chronic illnesses including heart disease, stroke, hypertension, obesity, diabetes and certain types of cancer.

PCRM claimed in its lawsuit that there were serious conflicts of interest affecting six out of 11 members on the Advisory Committee. Those conflicts, PCRM charged, influenced the committee in advocating the consumption of meat, dairy and eggs. According to documents submitted during the court proceedings, the chairman of the committee, Cutberto Garza, had direct ties with the National Dairy Council, while Richard Deckelbaum received grant funding from the National Dairy Promotion and Research Program and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. Scott Grundy served on the American Egg Board, and Johanna Dwyer was on the American meat Institute Committee and the National Dairy Promotion and Research Program Board. Dwyer was also sponsored by the National Dairy Council for a visiting professorship. Roland Weinsier received a \$500,000 grant from Bristol-Myers Squibb/Mead Johnson, a company that sells and promotes dairy-based products, and Eileen Kennedy serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors of the Dannon Research Institute, Inc., another dairy company.