

Discussion

This straightforward extrapolation demonstrates that if Americans were to alter their food consumption to meet select recommendations in the *Dietary Guidelines*, the impact on food demand and production in the United States could be substantial. Of course, it is unrealistic to assume a full adoption of the dietary recommendations. The previous *Dietary Guidelines*, released in June 2000, had several themes similar to those in the 2005 release (e.g., Americans need to eat more fruits and vegetables). However, according to ERS Food Guide Pyramid Servings data, estimated consumption changed little after the release of the 2000 version. For example, a comparison of average daily per capita servings adjusted for spoilage and other waste by commodity group between 1997-99 and 2001-03 shows vegetable and dairy consumption each rose by 0.2 percent, fruit consumption fell by 3.6 percent, and total flour and cereal products consumption fell by 2.3 percent.¹⁸ These small changes suggest that consumers' adoption of the recommendations will likely continue to be slow and incomplete.

Even though Americans may never fully adopt the recommendations in the *Guidelines*, consumers are constantly making dietary changes and may well make at least some dietary improvements, particularly as information in the new *Dietary Guidelines* and MyPyramid Food Guidance System are more widely disseminated and as our aging population becomes more aware of the benefits of nutritious diets in maintaining good health. Compliance with the 2005 recommendations may be more successful than with previous versions because of the accessibility and user-friendly features of MyPyramid on the Internet and because new supporting educational materials continue to be developed and distributed. Dietary trends change slowly over time in response to new dietary or medical information, popularity of some diets, changing tastes and preferences, and availability of new food products. For example, it is conceivable that, in the long term, as companies develop and produce new nonfat and low-fat milk and milk products and whole-grain products that appeal to consumers, domestic demand for these products will increase.¹⁹

Nevertheless, our estimate of full adoption provides an indication of the potential long-term impact on U.S. agriculture. Small estimated changes in consumption also suggest that U.S. agriculture would have adequate time to adjust production and the food industry would have time to develop and market new packaged fresh-food options and new processed foods. As evidenced by the plethora of new low-fat and low-carb products introduced in recent years, U.S. agriculture is flexible, constantly changing in response to changes in demand, new production and processing technologies, and supply shocks (Buzby et al., 2005). The production, trade, and acreage adjustments resulting from consumption changes would not be immediate and may never reach the scale estimated here. Additionally, the speed and extent of any adjustments may be constrained by U.S. farm policy and U.S. commitments with trading partners (e.g., dairy commitments with international trading partners are components of bilateral trade agreements).

The food industry is closely watching to see if, when, and how consumers will react to the new dietary recommendations. Consumers' reactions will

¹⁸ Meanwhile, consumption of added sugars fell by 3 percent and consumption of the meat, eggs, and nut group rose by 3.4 percent. Estimated changes in added fats and oils over this time frame are not reliable due to changes in data reporting.

¹⁹ See Buzby et al. (2005) for more discussion on the potential role of and impact on the different grain sectors.

help determine the quantity and mix of commodities grown by farmers and the quantity and mix of fresh and processed food products supplied by manufacturers. The dairy industry is waiting and watching to see if consumers boost intake of milk products, particularly low-fat and fat-free milk and milk-equivalent products. Consumers' reactions to the recommendations will also help determine what items appear on the menus at restaurants and other food outlets. Nutrition policy analysts hope to see a closing of the gap between actual intake and the *Guidelines'* recommendations. Farm policy analysts are also closely observing how the food consumption story unfolds, as only then will they be able to start measuring the *Guidelines'* true impacts on agriculture.