

Nutrition Labeling Issues - Government Activities: Introduction

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Food and Drug Administration

In 1989, Dr. Sullivan, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, asked the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to revise and improve food labels to make them more useful and understandable to consumers. FDA responded by publishing an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking in the Federal Register on August 8, 1989, holding a series of public hearings to solicit comments on how labels might better serve consumers, and publishing proposals on mandatory status, label content, reference standards, and serving sizes in the Federal Register on July 19, 1990. In response to the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) of 1990, which was passed by Congress and signed by President Bush on November 8, 1990, FDA revised its July 19th proposals and developed a number of additional proposals to cover such topics as the labeling of raw produce and fish, nutrient claims, ingredient labeling, food standards, health claims, and label format. The United States Department of Agriculture, which regulates meat and poultry, developed similar labeling proposals for the products under their jurisdiction. The FDA regulations are to be finalized by November 8, 1992, and are to be in effect by May 8, 1993, unless the comments submitted in response to the proposals provide adequate evidence of undue economic hardship. The major changes from previous labeling regulations are the requirement for mandatory labeling of most foods, a voluntary labeling program for raw produce and fish, revision of the label content, definitions for descriptive terms, and the establishment of approved health messages relating to foods. Consumers will benefit by having more information for making comparative and informative choices in the marketplace. FDA has provided estimates of lives and money to be saved based on reduced incidences of cardiovascular disease and cancer resulting from the label changes. Food manufacturers must have their products analyzed for the required nutrients or seek other sources of nutrient data for labeling purposes. For users of food composition data, the desired result will be an increase in the quantity and quality of data.

The following questions are concerns for database users and developers:

- Will industry make the analytical data (as opposed to label values) available?
- Will the data be sufficient for our research needs, i.e., will the data include the food components needed to answer research questions?
- Will industry provide only the nutrients required for the label (e.g., only four vitamins and minerals) or will they provide complete nutrition profiles?
- Will the requirement for data on more foods cause a decrease in the amount of data generated per food?
- What might be the trade-offs in terms of the quality and quantity of data that become available to users?