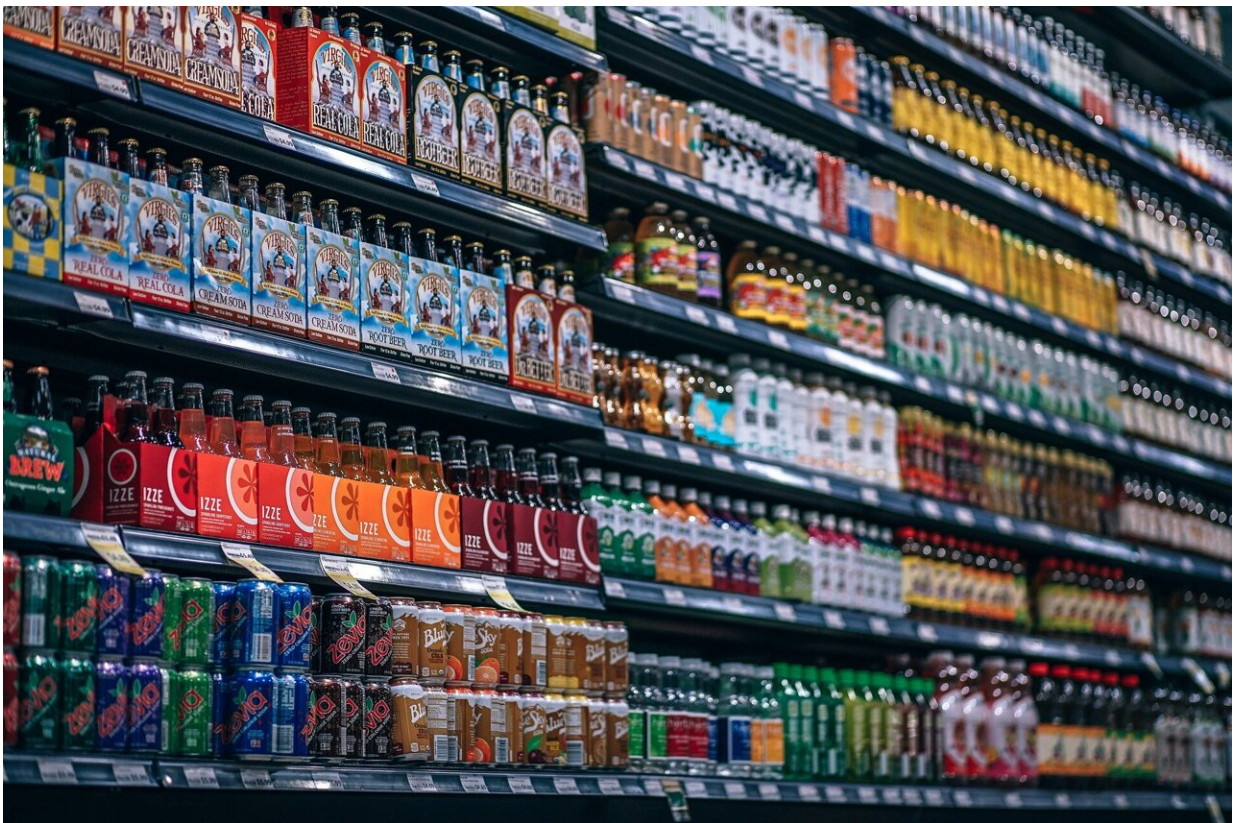


How the agri-food industry tried to influence revamp of Canada's Food Guide

May 27 2024, by Martin Lasalle



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In 2019, Health Canada published an updated version of Canada's Food Guide. Its recommendations include drinking more water, eating more plant-based proteins, limiting the intake of highly processed foods, and

cooking more meals at home.

During the three-year review process, major Canadian agri-food players used a range of strategies to oppose the changes. In all, they conducted 366 corporate political activities (i.e. lobbying efforts) of which 82 (22%) involved criticizing the [scientific data](#) on which Health Canada based its recommendations and 76 (21%) involved submitting non-peer-reviewed, cherry-picked industry-friendly data.

Those are the findings of a study published in the December 2023 issue of [Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada](#). Lead author Marie-Chantal Robitaille is a master's student at Université de Montréal supervised by Jean-Claude Moubarac, a professor in the Department of Nutrition.

Preventing undue corporate influence

Health Canada set up a committee to review the [scientific literature](#) and hold public consultations in order to update Canada's Food Guide on the basis of three guiding principles. To ensure transparency and avoid conflicts of interest, representatives of the food industry and industry-funded experts and scientists were excluded from the consultations.

"This decision by Health Canada was supported by the scientific literature and the World Health Organization, which has found that public-private collaboration can undermine the focus on the public interest and make it more difficult to establish [public health policies](#)," said Robitaille.

The previous version of the food guide was considered outdated by many health professionals, who criticized it as "ineffective and lacking in credibility because it had become a marketing tool for certain products," she noted.

Although excluded from the public consultations, food industry players expressed their views about the guidelines by submitting 11 briefs to the House Standing Committee on Health.

A wide range of tactics

Robitaille combed through these briefs and the websites of the 11 organizations that submitted them to survey their corporate political activities.

Her analysis revealed four main strategies:

- Information management, e.g., suppressing information, using the credibility of a third party
- Discursive strategies, e.g., framing the debate on food and public health-related issues to favor industry interests
- Political influence, e.g. direct lobbying and indirect access to policy makers
- Coalition management, e.g., establishing a network of support, especially with health professionals and other opponents

"I started by identifying the corporate political activities carried out by biofood industry players to influence the development of Canada's Food Guide and then documented and analyzed their discourses and positions on Health Canada's three guiding principles and the recommendations," Robitaille explained.

All-out lobbying effort

Three organizations accounted for the bulk of the 366 examples of corporate political activity Robitaille found: Dairy Farmers of Canada (24%), the Canadian Juice Council, which also represents manufacturers

of sweetened beverages and soft drinks (20%), and the National Cattle Feeder's Association (16%).

The most common practices were [information management](#) (197 examples, or 53.8%) and discursive strategies (108 examples, or 29.5%).

Within the information management category, the most frequently used strategy was suppressing information, which consisted mainly of criticizing the scientific evidence and emphasizing its complexity and uncertainty (98 examples or 27%).

Robitaille pointed to the Egg Farmers of Canada brief, which argued that "consultation and dialogue with both food producers and [health professionals](#) is an important step to ensure a balance of opinions are heard throughout the process."

Similarly, the Canadian Meat Council maintained that it should be consulted because "it had extensive expertise in nutrition and science, as well as experience in consumer education."

Industry messaging fell on deaf ears

According to Robitaille, the pressure from the agri-food industry on the committee charged with revising Canada's Food Guide and on Health Canada had no effect.

"This is a positive for Canada compared with other countries, where the food industry has succeeded in exerting considerable influence," said Robitaille. "Studies show that the same strategies have been used in other jurisdictions, most notably in the United States, where companies banded together in 2010 to 2012 to fight government efforts to combat obesity."

According to the article, one of the industry's main tactics was to "exaggerate the cost of the proposed changes, using an alarmist narrative suggesting that the proposed recommendations will fail and that many undesirable health and economic problems will affect the whole of society."

The new Canada's Food Guide: Guiding principles and recommendations

Principle No. 1: A variety of nutritious foods and beverages is the foundation for healthy eating. Health Canada recommends:

- The regular intake of vegetables, fruit, whole grains and protein-rich foods, especially plant-based sources of protein
- Eating foods that contain mainly [unsaturated fats](#) as opposed to saturated fats
- The regular intake of water

Principle No. 2: Processed or prepared foods and beverages high in sodium, sugars or saturated fat undermine healthy eating. Health Canada recommends:

- Limiting the consumption of foods high in sodium or saturated fat
- Avoiding beverages high in sugar

Principle No. 3: Knowledge and skills are needed to navigate the complex food environment and support healthy eating. Health Canada recommends:

- Choosing healthy food options at stores and restaurants
- Planning and preparing healthy meals and snacks

- Eating meals with family or friends as often as possible

More information: Marie-Chantal Robitaille et al, The bio-food industry's corporate political activity during Health Canada's revision of Canada's food guide, *Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada* (2023). [DOI: 10.24095/hpcdp.43.12.01](https://doi.org/10.24095/hpcdp.43.12.01)

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