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Before the
Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer
Relations, and Nutrition



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and

Subcommittee on Department Operations, Research
and Foreign Agriculture
House Committee on Agriculture

on

REORGANIZATION OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Messrs. Chairmen and Members of the Subcommittees:

We are here today at your request to discuss our August 17, 1981 report on the recent reorganization of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) (CED 81-150). As you know, on June 17, 1981, the Secretary of Agriculture announced a reorganization which established several agencies; abolished others; and changed the responsibilities of USDA officials in several areas, including marketing, inspection, grading, economics, consumer affairs, nutrition, environmental quality, and science and education. Our report on the reorganization addressed only those areas that relate to USDA's nutrition responsibilities and activities.

Any reorganization can be expected to disrupt operations in the short-run and affect the momentum in program operations. Whether the momentum built up in nutrition programs over the last

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few years continues under the reorganization remains to be seen. To a large extent, that will depend on the commitment, interest, intent, and actions of USDA and the Congress. Nevertheless, we have identified several potential impacts of the reorganization.

USDA REORGANIZATION

Attached to my statement is a chart showing the reorganization which you may want to look at while I discuss the reorganization. Under the reorganization, the Secretary abolished the Science and Education Administration (SEA), including its Human Nutrition Center, and established four new program agencies: the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), the Cooperative State Research Service, the Extension Service, and the National Agricultural Library.

The former Human Nutrition Center which was created in 1979 and housed the Department's diverse efforts in nutrition research, surveillance, information, and education, was divided. Five of the Center's human nutrition research centers were transferred to ARS, which is now under the jurisdiction of the Director of Science and Education.

The Center's other two groups that were involved in information activities were transferred to a new agency, the Human Nutrition Information Service under the Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services. These two groups include the Consumer Nutrition Center in Hyattsville, Maryland, which conducts the nationwide food consumption survey and maintains the nutrient data bank, among other activities, and the Human Nutrition Information and Dietary Guidance Staff. Finally, the Food and Nutrition

Information Center was also transferred to the new agency as its third component. This Center provides published and audiovisual nutrition materials to nutrition educators and departments of education and USDA food assistance program administrators at the State level.

In summary, the reorganization

- separates some of USDA's nutrition information functions from its nutrition research functions and
- decentralizes its human nutrition research activities by transferring nutrition research from its former, high-level, separate-agency status to one of the component research programs of ARS.

RATIONALE FOR THE REORGANIZATION

In announcing the reorganization, the Secretary said that the nutrition information function, which was previously under SEA, has been changed because it is important for the Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services to be responsible for that program. He said that "we've felt that the Assistant Secretary has both the obligation and is in the best position to provide the public with better nutrition information."

The Deputy Secretary of Agriculture told us that nutrition information should be the responsibility of the Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services, who is also responsible for the Department's domestic food assistance programs. He said that this change would allow the Assistant Secretary to target nutrition information specifically, for example, at food stamp users.

In abolishing SEA and decentralizing its functions, the Secretary said that he delegated greater authority to the administrators of the major science and education programs to strengthen the effectiveness of those programs and make them more efficient. The Deputy Secretary told us that he felt strongly that nutrition research should be tied closely to food and agriculture research and that this was a reason for transferring nutrition research from its separate organizational status in SEA, to ARS, which also has responsibility for food and agricultural research.

He also said that the centralized SEA was ineffective. The centralized SEA organization was viewed as an impediment to program effectiveness by two USDA advisory committees representing the State agricultural experiment stations and the State extension offices.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF THE REORGANIZATION

With any change in administration and reorganization, there naturally is some temporary disruption in operations because of changes in leadership, responsibilities, and reporting channels. Reorganizations also involve new tasks, new behaviors, and a realignment of role relationships. It is natural that the people who are affected will have some concerns and fears and that speculation will arise about their jobs, activities, and the effectiveness of the reorganization.

Some of the concerns of individuals inside and outside of USDA are:

- Will nutrition be less visible and deemphasized?
- How will nutrition issues be coordinated and integrated?

--Will nutrition information policies, programs, and strategies be adversely affected?

--Will nutrition research continue to be supported under its new decentralized setup?

Nutrition could be less visible and deemphasized

Nutrition is less visible at USDA with the abolishment of the Human Nutrition Center, which was created as a separate organization under the past administration. However, this does not necessarily mean a lack of commitment to nutrition because USDA has not made any overall cuts in the funding of nutrition research, education, and information programs.

A concern of the nutrition community, including individuals at USDA and at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is whether USDA's past emphasis and the high visibility of nutrition during the previous administration will continue. For example, in 1979 USDA established the Human Nutrition Center as a separate area of SEA in response to the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 which directed the Secretary of Agriculture to establish research into food and human nutrition as a separate and distinct mission of the Department. This was the first time that USDA's diverse efforts in nutrition research and information were coordinated under one administration. The current reorganization splits the Center, separating nutrition research from nutrition information activities.

The question arises whether the recent reorganization complies with the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977. We think it does. The act does not prescribe the manner in which the

Secretary is to attain the assigned mission, nor does the act prohibit any particular action the Secretary might choose to take to attain the assigned mission. We believe that the act intended that the Secretary have discretion in deciding the manner in which the assigned mission is to be accomplished.

Although details of USDA's nutrition policies have not yet been fully formulated, the Deputy Secretary told us that the present USDA administration is producer-farmer oriented. The Secretary has stated that USDA's major thrust will be to increase agricultural productivity, protect agriculture's natural resources, expand exports of agricultural products, and reduce Government regulations. While nutrition is not one of the major thrusts specifically mentioned, the Deputy Secretary said that USDA is "committed to active research and educational efforts in the human nutrition area and those efforts will not be manipulated by producer interests."

USDA has in general excluded basic agricultural research from the budget cuts it has made in other USDA programs. Agricultural research, including nutrition research, is one of the few areas being considered for a slight increase in funding.

The Deputy Secretary told us that the reorganization does not diminish in any way USDA's commitment or emphasis on human nutrition. He said that USDA is not changing priorities or the commitment to excellent research and education activities in the human nutrition area.

Coordinating and integrating nutrition issues could be more difficult

We believe that coordinating and integrating nutrition issues and policies within USDA, while not impossible, may be more difficult to accomplish under the reorganization. Over the past 4 years, the Congress, the Office of Technology Assessment, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, HHS, USDA, and GAO have expressed a need for improved coordination within and among the Federal departments involved in nutrition.

The reorganization could make coordination more difficult because of the separation of nutrition functions. The reorganization separates the nutrition information and nutrition research functions and divides them under the responsibilities of two separate high-level USDA officials instead of one official as was done under the prior administration. While the separation of functions has the advantage of putting information activities closer to the food assistance programs, it has the potential disadvantage of inhibiting easier access, coordination, exchange of ideas, and joint planning and integration of nutrition goals, strategies, and programs among the USDA agencies responsible for nutrition research, education, and information.

During the last few years, USDA, HHS, several other Federal agencies, and the Office of Science and Technology Policy were beginning to establish a momentum in coordinating Federal efforts in the area of nutrition. Although coordination may have been difficult, we believe there was a genuine interest and effort to establish and use coordination mechanisms. We believe part of

this momentum was due to the existence of departmentwide nutrition coordinators at both USDA and HHS.

When we issued our report a month ago, we stated that, at least temporarily, interested parties outside of USDA may have difficulty obtaining quick and comprehensive responses to departmentwide nutrition questions because of the lack of a departmentwide nutrition coordinator or at least a formally designated liaison for all nutrition matters and the absence of clearly established coordination mechanisms. We understand that USDA has recently established a new policy and coordination mechanism for all cross-cutting issues, such as nutrition, and has also appointed a nutrition advisor in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services. Also, the focal point for nutrition issues is the Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services.

USDA will continue past efforts to provide nutrition information, but changes in policies, programs, and strategies are uncertain

The Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services has said that the new Human Nutrition Information Service will continue to carry out the responsibilities of its component groups as previously done. She has stated that any change in direction of nutrition information policies will not be made until a director is appointed to the new agency.

The Deputy Secretary said that the reorganization creates for the first time a new USDA agency devoted to nutrition information and that this reflects the highlighting of nutrition information. He also said that one of the positive impacts of the

reorganization is that it will make it easier to link nutrition education, information, and surveillance activities with the target audience of the food assistance programs like food stamps; child nutrition; and women, infants, and children because these activities and programs are now the responsibility of the same Assistant Secretary. We agree with the positive impact of creating a new nutrition information agency and linking it with food assistance program participants.

A representative of a consumer group and a nutrition professional have pointed out their concern that (1) although the Department would shift information activities toward food program participants, it would slacken its information activities directed at the general public and (2) nutrition surveillance functions of measuring changes in people's diets and eating patterns should be the responsibility of an independent group and not the responsibility of the same official responsible for food assistance programs. While we do not know the impact that consolidating the surveillance function and the food assistance function could have on reporting objective surveillance data, we believe that efforts to ensure objective data should be maintained. We also believe it is important to provide the necessary feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of the food assistance programs.

Another concern of some nutritionists and consumer group representatives is whether USDA will continue to promote the joint USDA-HHS Dietary Guidelines For Americans or any revision of them. Although this concern may not seem to be directly related to the reorganization, questions have been raised about

whether the reorganization was an attempt to prevent any future development and/or distribution of them. We did not find any information to support this. The Deputy Secretary told us that USDA has not rescinded the dietary guidelines and that USDA will continue to distribute the remaining copies until the supply is depleted. As of August 20, about 95,000 copies of the 7 million printed were still on hand. We were told that USDA is gradually shifting toward a policy of charging a small fee for all USDA publications and that, in the future, a nominal fee may be charged for the dietary guidelines.

The Deputy Secretary told us that nutrition is an embryonic science that does not have all the definitive answers. He also said that USDA should not tell people what to eat, but that nutrition information should be provided to people to help them make their own decisions.

The dietary guidelines are supposed to be reviewed by a congressionally directed advisory group of representatives from USDA, HHS, and the National Academy of Sciences. As of today, the new group has not begun its review. USDA told us that any decision regarding the future of the dietary guidelines will depend on the group's evaluation of the dietary guidelines and public comments on them. Nutrition professionals from both USDA and HHS told us that USDA should try to work with and revise the dietary guidelines, if necessary, rather than to think about discarding them completely.

Nutrition research needs special
attention under its new
decentralized setup

Under the reorganization, the nutrition research activities were decentralized and some of the nutrition information activities, such as conducting nutrition surveillance and surveys, behavioral and communications research, and food composition analysis, were transferred to the new Human Nutrition Information Service. Some nutrition professionals believe that part of these activities are really research, at least applied research, which should be kept together or at least closely coordinated with the nutrition research centers that were transferred to ARS.

The Deputy Director for Administrative Management of Science and Education told us that some of the functions of the Consumer Nutrition Center could be classified as methodology research as well as information. He said that the reorganization planners had considered splitting the Consumer Nutrition Center along the lines of its information and research functions but decided instead that it was more important to keep together the methodological research for collecting nutrition data, collecting nutrition survey and food composition data, and interpreting such data.

Before the reorganization and under SEA, human nutrition research was separate and distinct from agricultural research. Under the reorganization, five human nutrition research centers of SEA (Human Nutrition) were transferred and placed as a separate area under ARS. The five directors of the human nutrition research centers report to their appropriate ARS regional administrators for administrative matters and to the National Program

Staff (Nutrition) at ARS headquarters, headed by an assistant to the deputy administrator, ARS, for program planning, priority setting, and budget formulation matters.

The Associate Administrator, ARS, told us that while nutrition research was decentralized in part, a national focus and careful attention from headquarters was also necessary because three of the five nutrition research centers were new centers in the early stages of developing and implementing their research programs. The official believed that these centers needed special attention because of their infancy and the national scope of their research programs.

The Deputy Secretary told us that he was committed to a strong and excellent nutrition research program and that USDA will continue to have a lead Federal role in nutrition. Science and Education officials told us that they are committed to nutrition and support the need and importance of human nutrition research. They are attempting to incorporate human nutrition into the rest of food and agricultural research but at the same time give nutrition a separate and distinct identification.

CONCLUSION

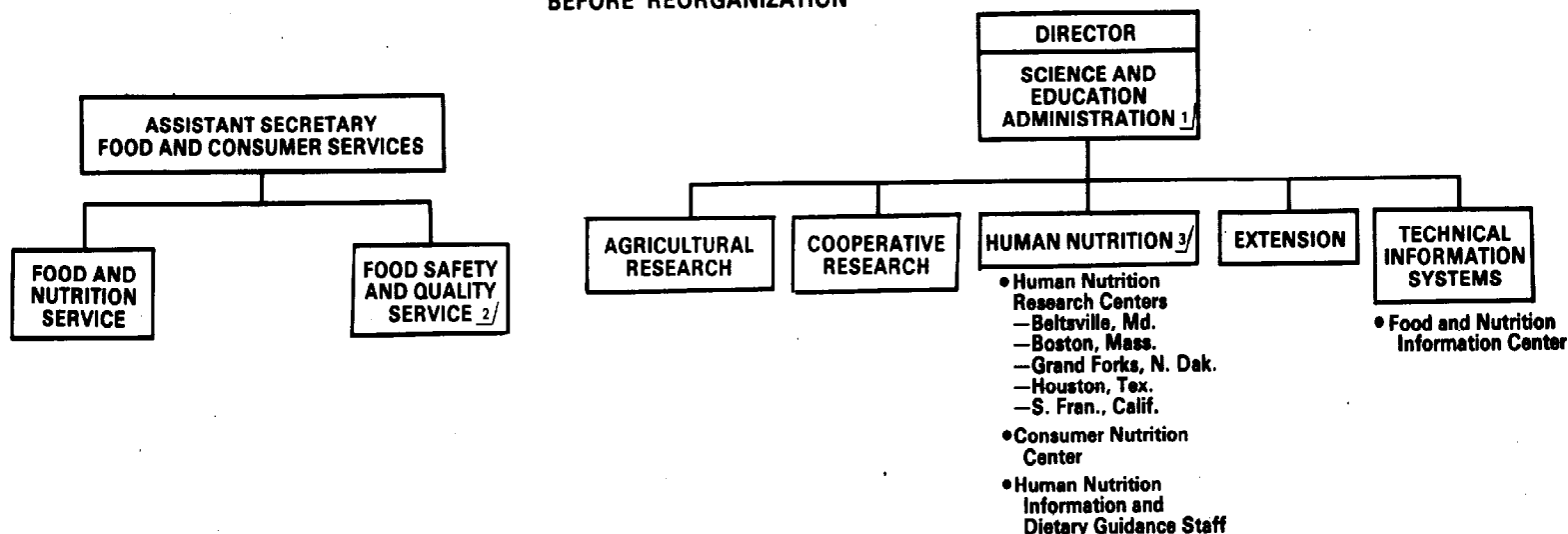
In conclusion, we believe that regardless of how nutrition is organized at USDA, it needs some special attention and a national focus because it is primarily a national issue and not purely a regional problem. Also, the new regional human nutrition research centers should be carefully monitored and guided as they progress toward developing and implementing their research programs. Finally, the nutrition research and information

programs of USDA and HHS are very critical because they provide much of the basis for the food and nutrition information used by the professional community and the mass media in providing information to the American people.

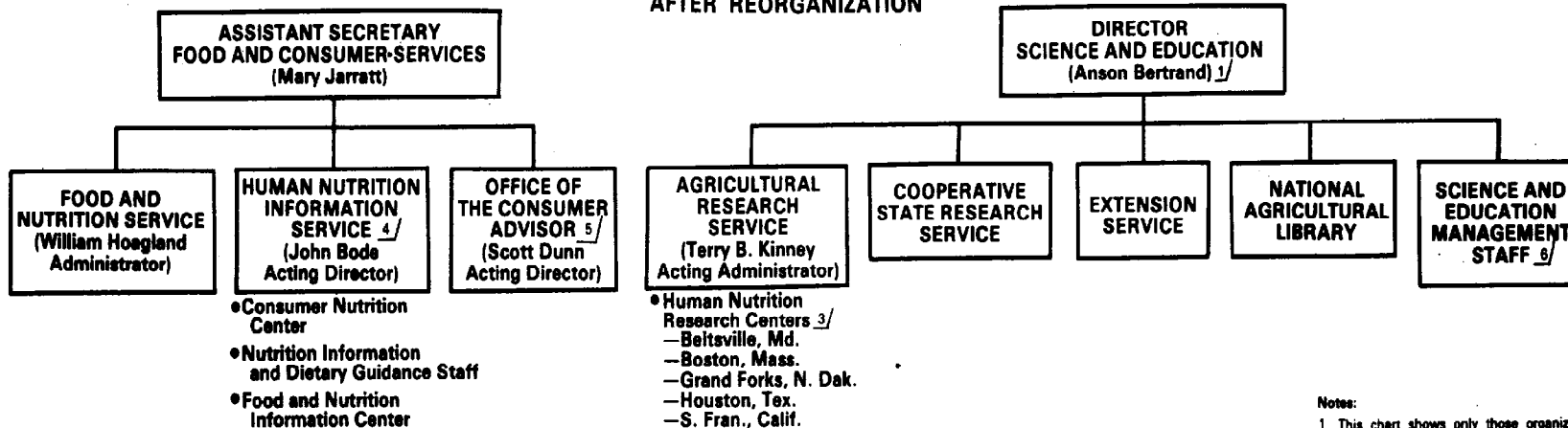
This concludes my statement. My colleagues and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

REORGANIZATION OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (Effective June 17, 1981)

BEFORE REORGANIZATION



AFTER REORGANIZATION



1/ Science and Education Administration (SEA) is split into Agricultural Research Service, Cooperative State Research Service, Extension Service, National Agricultural Library, and the Science and Education Management Staff.

2/ Food Safety and Quality Service (FSQS) is renamed Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and transferred to the Assistant Secretary for Marketing and Inspection Services.

3/ SEA (Human Nutrition) is abolished. The five human nutrition research centers are transferred to ARS. The center directors will report to their appropriate ARS regional administrators for administrative matters and to the National Program Staff (Nutrition) at ARS headquarters, headed by an assistant to the deputy administrator, for program planning, priority setting, and budget formulation matters. The other three SEA nutrition groups are transferred to the Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services.

4/ The new Human Nutrition Information Service (HNIS) is established from three groups transferred from the former Science and Education Administration (Human Nutrition) and the Technical Information Systems.

5/ Office of the Consumer Advisor, formerly named the Office of Consumer Affairs, is transferred from the Office of the Secretary.

6/ Science and Education Management Staff provides services for all Science and Education agencies.

Notes:

1. This chart shows only those organizational changes which directly affect the Department's nutrition activities.
2. Under the previous administration, a departmentwide nutrition coordinator position was established in the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture. That position has not been reestablished by the present administration.