The New

Lawmakers are cooking up ways to encourage better eating and cultivate local economies.

BY AMY WINTERFELD

s Americans leap into the New Year, many will resolve to eat healthier to make up for holiday indulgences. New guidelines for what eating healthy means, released last year by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, include a new "MyPlate" icon: a dinner plate that divides fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and dairy into appropriate portions on a colorful place setting.

With more than 33 percent of American adults overweight or obese—resulting in medical costs of about \$147 billion a year, according to 2009 study in Health Affairs—and 17 percent of children and adolescents also above a healthy weight, eating more nutritiously is paramount.

"We need to make sure we have the most nutritious food that we can," says Texas Representative Carol Alvarado. "A child who receives a healthy meal will be a better student, a healthier adult and less likely to have heart disease and diabetes."

Healthy eating is an issue many lawmakers have already tackled. Some support comes from those who want to encourage healthy choices by bringing more fruit and vegetables to their communities. Others see a silver lining in the salad plate: a lift to local economies by promoting state agriculture products.

Fill Half Your Plate With Produce

The new dietary guidelines recommend a plate half full of fruits and vegetables. Yet 32 states scored at or below the national average, in a 2011 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The report looked at the availability of supermarkets, produce stands and farmers' markets that typically sell healthy foods such as fresh produce, whole grains and low-fat dairy products.

"My district is underserved by grocery stores and has more convenience stores that don't provide fruits and vegetables," says Alvarado. "I support community gardens—it teaches children about where food comes from and how it grows and also teaches them to take pride in their community."

State legislatures in Illinois, Louisiana, New York and Pennsylvania have supported public-private partnerships to bring healthy food sellers into urban, suburban and rural communities

Healthy



currently starved of produce. Not only can this help local diets, it also may give a boost to local economies. Grants, loans and tax credits are offered to grocery operators to build new full-service stores or improve existing facilities by adding refrigerated storage for fresh produce, for example. In Pennsylvania, over a five-year span, 5,000 jobs were created or retained as a result. New federal funding is available to states for these efforts.

California legislators in 2011 enacted a tax credit for farmers who donate fruits and vegetables to food banks. In 2010, Mississippi lawmakers exempted food grown or processed in Mississippi and sold at farmers' markets from the sales tax. Laws in California, Illinois, Nebraska and Washington support electronic card readers at farmers' markets to encourage public benefit recipients to use their cards to buy fresh produce.

Lawmakers have also looked at promoting healthier habits for school children while supporting local economies by purchasing local food for schools. In 2011, Michigan legislators created a school purchasing preference for food grown or produced by Michigan businesses. New Jersey lawmakers enacted a "Jersey Fresh" program that allows schools to adopt price preferences for local agricultural and farm products, improve kitchen facilities to incorporate more fresh, locally grown produce, and add information about the value of eating fresh, locally grown produce to school curricula.

"Educating our children about our state's diverse and delicious agricultural fare and the nutritious value of local and safe 'Jersey Fresh' produce will help them cultivate healthier food choices and make them aware of the importance of supporting local farmers," says New Jersey Assemblyman John McKeon.

A Rutgers University report found that \$1.1 million spent in New Jersey in 2000 to promote local fare had an economic impact of \$63.2 million. It also generated an increase in state and local tax revenue by \$2.2 million for the year. In 2011-2012 Oregon legislators created grants to reimburse districts for buying local food products and for conducting certain food-based educational activities.

Last year, Missouri Representative Casey Guernsey sponsored legislation that established a Farm-to-Table Advisory Board to



Representative Carol Alvarado Texas



Representative Casey Guernsey Missouri



Assemblyman John McKeon New Jersey



Senator Craig Estes Texas

"link schools and state institutions with local and regional farms for the purchase of locally grown agricultural products; increase market opportunities for locally grown agricultural products; and assist schools and other entities to teach children and the public about nutrition, food choices, obesity, and health; and the value of having an accessible supply of locally grown food."

In Colorado and Massachusetts, lawmakers established food policy advisory councils in 2010. Massachusetts directed its council to increase local food production and state use of local products. Colorado's council is charged with fostering a healthy food supply while enhancing agricultural and natural resources, encouraging economic growth, promoting "Colorado Proud" products and improving community health.

In Texas, a "Go Texan" agricultural marketing and promotion effort by Senator Craig Estes supports programs for rural economic development, marketing and promotion of agricultural and other products grown, processed, or produced in the state. Vermont also enacted legislation in 2011 to encourage economic development by marketing state foods and products.

In 2011, legislators in at least six other states—Georgia, New Mexico, New York, South Carolina, Virginia and Washington—proposed legislation to encourage local food purchasing or "buying from the backyard" by state agencies or schools. Five of those bills carried over into 2012.

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Bring on the Amber Waves

Grains cover another quarter of the USDA-recommended plate. The new dietary guidelines advise "make at least half your grains whole grains." An Oregon law enacted in 2011 puts whole grain flours on an equal footing with enriched flour. Previously, only enriched flour met health requirements for manufacturers of bread, rolls or buns.

Guidelines for healthy school foods and snacks in North Carolina and Rhode Island call for increasing whole grain and grain products. Texas has just created a grain producers indemnity fund to protect farmers from economic hardship.

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Pack in the Protein

Most Americans eat enough protein, but the new guidelines encourage leaner and more varied selections of protein-rich foods. Meat, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, peanut butter and nuts or seeds all provide protein. Legislators focused on fish last year in at least two states.

Rhode Island's fishing community will benefit from a newly created Seafood Marketing Collaborative to support local fish-

ermen and small businesses. It will be promoting the health and vitality of the state's seafood populations, identifying regulatory restrictions that inhibit local seafood businesses, and increasing consumer demand for local seafood through marketing.

Even in land-locked Nebraska, legislators appropriated funds to enhance fisheries by improving hatcheries and buying and developing fishing facilities that improve access for fishermen.

Washington appropriated \$3.47 million for improving recreational fisheries. Legislators also directed state agencies to look for partnerships that will help keep fish hatcheries operating with less reliance on state money. In 2009, another New England state, Vermont, established a milk and meat pilot program to encourage purchasing local milk and meat for school meals and to provide technical assistance to schools to help them provide the most local fruits and vegetables possible.

In Arkansas and Indiana, lawmakers established liability protection for agritourism, which encourages education, entertainment or recreation on farms and ranches.



MyPlate places a cool blue glass of milk next to the plate as a reminder that the dietary guide-lines recommend switching to fat-free or low-fat milk. Dairy products add protein, as well as calcium, vitamins D, B12 and A, phosphorus, and potassium.

Licensed child-care facilities in California must now provide water and serve only low-fat or nonfat milk to children older than 2. Minnesota appropriated \$500,000 for each of the next two years to the state's six Second Harvest food banks to purchase milk from Minnesota processors.

Massachusetts legislators, in 2010, directed the state's public health department to use scientific guidelines to set standards for school snacks and beverages that encourage greater consumption of water, low- and nonfat milk, fresh fruits and vegetables, and reduction of fat and sugar in snacks. Beverage standards set by Louisiana legislators in 2009 require high schools to serve low-fat milk or skim milk.

In New York, a Calcium Purchasing Preference Initiative is pending that would require foods and beverages that contain a higher level of calcium to be purchased for government buildings so long as they are same quality, and equal or lower in price.



Learn more about public health efforts to improve nutrition at www.ncsl.org/magazine.