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Key partners working together to stem obesity epidemic

Childhood obesity is one of the most serious health problems facing our state. A child born today is three times more likely to be overweight by age 18 than a child born 30 years ago. Today's young children also face a one-in-three lifetime risk of developing type 2 diabetes — if they are Latino, a 50% chance — and an increased risk of heart disease, hypertension and certain

forms of cancer. Our health care system, already stretched, may collapse under the “weight” of this situation.

Recognition is growing that the causes and solutions are not to be found in the health sector alone, but rather in the larger societal and environmental context. We must scrutinize the environmental factors that can act as barriers to healthy eating, including food cost, availability and marketing, as well as physical, economic and logistical limits on children's daily physical activity. For example, a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that a typical 8- to 12-year-old child may see more than 7,000 food and beverage commercials in a year, and few if any promote healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables. Fewer than 2% of our nation's children actually eat meals that meet the current recommended Dietary Guidelines.

California has responded by establishing food, nutrition and physical activity policies to protect the health of our children. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has made it a priority to address this issue and has championed many of these public policy efforts. Among the state's achievements is the passage of broad legislation governing the nutritional content of foods and beverages served in K-12 schools. This legislation was preceded by a pilot program to implement the new guidelines, conducted by the California Department of Education, funded by the California Department of Food and Agriculture, and evaluated by nutrition specialists with the UC Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) and staff at the Center for Weight and Health at the UC Berkeley College of Natural Resources and School of Public Health. This study provided critical information on the feasibility of limiting foods and beverages of low nutritional value, increasing the consumption of California-grown fresh produce, and enhancing the quality of school lunch and student fitness programs.

Similarly, UC is collaborating with the California Department of Education on California Fresh Start, a program established by the state legislature in 2005 to provide a 10-cent-per-meal reimbursement to school districts that offer an additional serving of fruits or vegetables. The

Center for Weight and Health is evaluating the program and identifying potential impacts for California agriculture and the state economy.

Nutrition faculty at UC Berkeley and UC Davis are also providing leadership. In this issue, scientists report on the interrelationship among asthma, magnesium and obesity (see page 119). In another study funded by the Centers for Disease Control, UC researchers analyze the literature on the dietary determinants of obesity (see page 112). While reports in the press have conflicting messages, this review synthesizes the research and identifies the factors most likely to protect against obesity: higher consumption of dietary fiber, fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products. UC nutrition, family and consumer science advisors (NFCS) are carrying this message to the public.

ANR has specifically created workgroups on nutrition, obesity and related health conditions. One recent workgroup project, summarized in this issue, examined the relationships among food insecurity, parental feeding practices and obesity in California's Latino population (see page 106). Another article describes the way in which nutrition advisors are forming countywide coalitions, effectively linking health, education and agriculture groups to more effectively tackle child obesity prevention (see page 124).

For example, ANR advisors are developing innovative programs to improve child nutrition by: collaborating with the Fresno County Farm Bureau to teach children about the link between healthy eating and agriculture; providing education about farmers' markets in Butte County; educating communities about fruits, vegetables and cooking methods in Sacramento County; working through the UC Small Farms Workgroup to help growers view their crops from a consumer perspective in Santa Clara County; establishing new farmers' markets in rural Tulare County; and supplying fresh produce for community events in Kern County.

Further, NFCS advisors are providing educational programs and materials in a variety of languages to individuals and agencies that serve low-income populations through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program and the Food Stamp Nutrition Education program.

The obesity epidemic in children highlights the importance of working together in policy areas such as the Farm Bill reauthorization, now under way, to ensure that our food supply and nutrition programs support healthy eating. Limiting the focus to individual choice ignores the environmental context within which we make those choices. When the agriculture and nutrition sectors work together to address obesity, it can create a win-win situation that benefits both Californians' health and the agricultural economy of the state.