

# Rationing And Mitigation Don't Lead To Cultural Maturity



By *Hank Campbell* — October 11, 2016



Credit: Shutterstock [1]

America has an obesity problem. We can thank science for that.

Not science directly, of course, the scientific method doesn't make us pick up that spoon, but science in the sense that it's now easy to be obese. For the first time in the history of the world, the poorest people can afford to be fat, a much different scenario than was painted a few generations ago, with mass starvation and mandatory birth control promoted by Apocalyptic firebrands like Drs. Paul Ehrlich and John Holdren.

Rather than watch helplessly as people starved, as was the future promised those born in the 1960s, scientists have made it possible to produce more food on less land using less environmental strain than was ever believed realistic. Three generations ago, meat was something most people could not afford to eat every day, now we can get a hamburger for a dollar.

That's a fantastic thing - but we did not evolve in a world of plentiful food, instead nature was out to kill us, primarily through starvation and a hostile environment. It was boom and bust, for the most part. Today, food is a commodity and when something becomes a commodity, it takes a while for culture to catch up. Science has outpaced our cultural maturity, and it has led to a certain amount of doublethink about food.

We all know what doublethink is - the tendency to believe two things in opposition. "I'm from the IRS and I'm here to help you" is doublethink, as are conflicting platitudes such as "You are only as old as you feel" but that you should "act your age." In America, we are told we are too fat and in perfect double-think fashion we are also told that we shouldn't waste food. To capitalize on that, nutritionists and environmentalists have become double-think busybodies, they've run out of real

problems to complain about so they have started inventing them. (1) America leads the world in efficient use of farmland, but that's not good enough. Salt, wheat, sugar, meat, all have been targeted as magic bullets for health problems. The government is even going out of its way to invent 86 million people they claim are going to get diabetes, [as I wrote about in the Chicago Tribune](#) [2].

Telling people they should be forced into small portion sizes hasn't helped much, nor have mandatory labels. Health pundits and environmental fundraising groups have thus been stymied. As is often the case, when two parties are at an uncomfortable impasse and the public is getting fatigued, both turn on a new actor. In this case, annoying academics who claim to be experts on nutrition (e.g. Marion Nestle) can team up with the environmentalists they sympathize with politically and demonize meat, or dairy, anything grown by farmers. And they can promote the belief that government can save us by taxation and guidelines. (2)

Pigou is cheering but if you care about evidence-based decision-making, you are not. Because humankind has not caught up to agriculture in cultural maturity, and more books and laws and lawsuits about labels and criticisms of farmers won't make that happen faster. It will just penalize poor people, the same people we wanted to have not be stuck paying a giant chunk of their income for basic needs for the last few hundred years. Still, the effort goes on. [In Harvard Business Review](#) [3], authors intellectualize a simplistic economic analysis which found that people will buy non-fat milk if whole milk is more expensive and extrapolate that out to be all food. There are way too many confounders in that - milk is subsidized and regulated, the period they used was both before and during an economic recession, and most people do not actually look at the label and make a choice on fat content when buying milk. Nonetheless, they argue their model would work for hamburgers and soda. Yet a more relevant case to soda, Mexico, [found that sales of soda went up despite higher taxes](#) [4]. People had higher income and wanted to have some fun with it. In New York City, the government created a way to generate more revenue and claimed they could lower smoking by boosting cigarette taxes another \$5 per pack. [It's been good for criminals](#) [5] (and led to a high-profile death at the hands of police [when they were told to crack down on people selling "loosies"](#) [6] - individual cigarettes - which became more popular) but tax revenue plummeted with no decline in smoking beyond what was already happening thanks to groups like the American Council on Science and Health noting that smoking will kill you.

Nutritionists and environmentalists are in a War on Fun, they make money if you are in a panic, or are at least miserable. And if it won't work with the public directly, they target suppliers. In California, environmentalists got Governor Jerry Brown to mandate a 40 percent methane reduction by 2030. (3) Cows are, of course, ruminants, and they burp. Methane. It can come from the other end as well. And from grass. These onerous restrictions are going to cap methane, because California dairy farmers will go out of business. Milk is regulated, they can't pass along the higher costs of regulations to consumers, so they will exit the industry after the old person running the farm now retires. Wisconsin is cheering the California decision but it won't make any more difference in emissions than if you were to decide you were going to buy gas at a Chevron station instead of Exxon.

Government plays along with this stuff because, well, no one is sure why. Activists spend their

money on lobbyists who say salt is bad, and consumers don't know about salt because it's everywhere, so we need labels. Then activists can sue over the labels. Eliminated from the discussion is the reality that [the recommended levels on salt won't actually make anyone healthier](#) [7]. In New York City, they banned trans fats and diabetes went up. They wanted to ban Big Gulps, claiming that would cure obesity, but only if they banned soda, and not the high-calorie Starbucks drinks government staffers enjoy.

We're in a world where we can at a rapid pace accomplish what ancient farmers could only do slowly and people are still getting used to that. But it will happen. As food remains a commodity, and a basic need is no longer a large chunk of income, diets will adjust, treats will be treats. Legislating how many calories people are allowed to eat now, and what those should be, is nanny government at its most ridiculously obscene. But penalizing the farmers who grow the food, and turning them into environmental villains, is even worse.

#### NOTES:

(1) Though it was a long time coming. [The Great Cranberry Scare of 1959](#) [8] was a dud, with both Presidential candidates eating them at every train stop. Then environmentalists had a great deal of success, at least until Natural Resources Defense Council was caught manufacturing hysteria about alar on apples. Since then, worrying about whether a toxic pesticide is organic or synthetic is primarily the hobby of wealthy elites, and the work-force they have gotten to self-identify with them.

(2) Even if they have been debunked. USDA still claims you should drink low-fat milk, despite any evidence it is healthier. Kids who drink whole milk [are actually less obese](#) [9].

(3) Methane? What happened to CO<sub>2</sub>? Fracking happened. Natural gas helped cause CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to plummet, emissions from coal are back at early 1980s levels and dropping as we speak. So environmentalists had to invent a new problem, and did, in methane from dairy cows.

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[2] <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-prediabetes-diabetes-pharma-epidemic-perspec-0801-jm-20160729-story.html?source=acsh.org>

[3] <https://hbr.org/2016/09/even-a-14-cent-food-tax-could-lead-to-healthier-choices?source=acsh.org>

[4] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2016/05/05/war-on-fun-fail-after-tax-soda-sales-rise-in-mexico>

[5] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2016/02/01/matt-leave-loosies-alone-see-fewer-tombstones>

[6] <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/kass/ct-eric-garner-kass-met-1205-20141205-column.html?source=acsh.org>

[7] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2016/02/26/how-toxic-is-salt>

[8] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2015/11/23/the-first-great-chemical-cancer-scare-cranberries-thanksgiving-1959>

[9] <http://adc.bmj.com/content/early/2013/02/13/archdischild-2012-302941.short?source=acsh.org>