

Testimony of
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before the
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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am Dr. Hank Izzo, vice president, research and development, Mars, Snackfood US. We appreciate the opportunity to testify today in support of improving the national school nutrition standards. I would like to begin by thanking Chairman Harkin for his consistent leadership on this issue. As you know, Mars worked closely with your office during the most recent Farm Bill in an effort to update our school nutrition standards, and we look forward to continuing to work with you and the Committee this year in order to improve the nutritional environment for children in schools nationwide.

I would also like to thank Ranking Member Chambliss for his support for Mars, Incorporated over the years. We were very pleased to have Senator Chambliss visit one of our plants last August and look forward to continuing to build on this relationship in the years to come.

Mars is a strong supporter of reforming our national school food standards. We believe the current standards, which date back to the 1970s, should be updated so that children have access to a broad selection of nutritious products, regardless of where they go to school. A national school standard will make this possible, and we believe that there are meaningful, practicable standards that can readily be adopted by Congress or USDA.

Mars, Incorporated, is a family-owned company that produces some of the world's leading foods, snack foods, drinks and petcare products, and operates in more than 70 countries.

We've been in business for nearly 100 years and are best known for our high quality chocolate products, such as M&M's® and Snickers®, which we believe should be consumed in moderation, as treats, and as part of a balanced and healthy diet. However, across the Mars company, our portfolio includes a diverse set of products including Uncle Ben's Rices®, which are made in Senator Cochran's home state of Mississippi, Seeds of Change® certified organic food products, healthy World of Grains® crackers and cookies, Wrigley sugar-free chewing gums, and a long line of nutritional petcare products such as Pedigree, Cesar, Greenies, and Sheba.

As a global food manufacturer, Mars aspires to be a leader in creating a healthier environment, making a significant contribution to the promotion of a healthy lifestyle through our products – both existing and new – and our business behavior, which aims to ensure responsible consumption of our brands.

Our collaboration with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, and the development of the Generation Max™ brand of snacks for teens, which I will discuss momentarily, are demonstrations of this ongoing commitment and leadership. In fact, we believe these public-private partnerships are a good model for the national school nutrition standards you are considering.

We recognize the challenges before us and take seriously our responsibility to act in the public interest. Mars is committed to doing its part to increase access to nutritious foods and help address the health challenges facing our youth.

Mars has been, and will continue to be, a food industry market leader where it concerns responsible advertising, nutrition labeling, and innovation.

Responsible advertising – We were the first chocolate company to voluntarily discontinue advertising and marketing directed toward children under age 12 worldwide. This went into effect at the end of 2007.

Nutrition labeling – In keeping with our corporate philosophy to act responsibly and transparently so consumers can make informed choices, last year Mars became the first chocolate company in the world to voluntarily roll out new easy to read and understand nutrition labels. The so-called Guideline Daily Amount information labels can be found on our chocolate, non-chocolate confectionery, and other food brands, starting now in Europe, Australia, and the U.S. The new labels are in bold print on the front of the packaging. You don't need reading glasses to read the Mars labels and you don't need a Ph.D. to understand them. We believe our improved nutrition labels will help consumers make informed choices about the foods they eat.

Innovation – As a science-based company, Mars continues to invest in research and development that can help us make our products more nutritious. For example, we committed significant resources to reduce trans fat in our products. In fact, all of our snack foods and food products have one thing in common today – on the label, you will see zero trans fat.

Our former King Size confectionery products have been changed to multiple piece formats to encourage portion control – and our research shows that consumers are, in fact, sharing more or saving half for later.

We are adding more whole grains to our products including our KUDOS® granola bars, World of Grains® crackers and cookies, and UNCLE BEN'S Rices®; we've reduced sodium levels in our flavored rice dishes and begun offering certified organic food and snack choices under our certified organic SEEDS OF CHANGE® product line.

Furthermore, with its recent acquisition of the Wm. Wrigley Jr. Company, the Mars portfolio now includes a wide range of sugar free chewing gums – including Extra®, Eclipse®, Orbit®, and 5™. Science has shown that chewing sugar-free gum provides important wellness benefits, including positive contributions in the areas of oral health, weight management, focus and concentration and stress relief.

In addition to product innovations, in 2006 Mars became one of the first companies to partner with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a non-profit organization started by the William J. Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association.

The goal of the Alliance is to stop the nationwide increase in childhood obesity by 2010 and to empower kids to make healthy lifestyle choices.

The Alliance has issued guidelines that promote nutrient-rich foods, fat-free and low-fat dairy products and place limits on calories, fat, saturated fat, trans fat, sugar and sodium. The guidelines endorse what we call a 35-10-35 snack food formula, meaning no more than 35% of calories come from fat, no more than 10% of calories come from saturated fat and less than 35% of the product's weight is sugar. There are also other nutrient guidelines and calorie limits by school age – elementary, middle and high school.

In joining the Alliance, Mars pledged that we would not be offering for sale in schools any products that do not meet the 35-10-35 standards. To meet this commitment, Mars was the only company to develop an entirely new line of healthier products, which we call Generation Max™, which are available to schools across the country today. These products meet the fat, sugar, sodium and calorie standards agreed to by the Alliance. If a new national school nutrition standard is established, more children will have access to these and other nutritious snacks.

Mars has also agreed to work cooperatively with the Alliance to encourage schools, education associations and others, including the food industry and distribution chain, to adopt the guidelines. We have made presentations and provided information to encourage adoption of standards to the National Automated Merchandisers Association (the national vending trade group), the School Nutrition Association, the National Confectioners Association and to our vending distributors.

Mars, as well as its Wrigley subsidiary, were among the initial companies to sponsor the American Council for Fitness and Nutrition's Healthy Schools Partnership (HSP), which is a pilot program in Kansas City. The innovative program teaches children energy balance; valuable lessons that will help to promote healthy lifestyles and healthy weight for kids. HSP is a partnership between the American Council for Fitness and Nutrition Foundation (ACFN), PE4life and the American Dietetic Association Foundation (ADAF).

Mars also has donated one million dollars to the Feeding America/Kids Café program, which provides nutritious, balanced meals to needy children across the country.

Finally, Mars recognizes the health benefits of whole grains in reducing the risk of heart disease and has long advocated for the use of more whole grains in school lunches. Mars Foodservices is the foodservice division of Mars, Incorporated, and specializes in meeting the needs of foodservice professionals in places of learning and hospitals. We have broadened our foodservice portfolio on whole grains to provide healthful options for school lunch programs and use both the Whole Grain Health Claim and the Whole Grain Council stamp to help communicate our whole grain products to school directors and operators.

Mars, Incorporated supports efforts to update and reform our national school nutrition standards in 2009.

First, we believe that new national school nutrition standards will help make sure that children have access to a broad selection of nutritious foods at school, which in turn should help the nation tackle some of the health challenges our youth face today, including obesity, and the related conditions including early onset type 2 diabetes and hypertension – conditions that only a few years ago were thought to afflict adults only.

Second, schools operate in a unique environment that warrants special treatment when it comes to nutrition standards. At home, parents make decisions about food – but at school, children often make decisions about what to eat for themselves. An updated and reformed national school nutrition standard will make it easier for food manufacturers and schools to work together to make sure children make smart decisions about the foods they consume. It also will provide some peace of mind to parents, knowing that items for sale meet nutrition guidelines.

Finally, food science and nutrition research advanced significantly over the past 30 years, when the current standard was developed. Today, we understand so much more about the relationship between food and metabolism, health promotion, wellness and disease prevention. Mars believes it is time to apply that knowledge to an updated, modernized school nutrition standard.

In our opinion, the national school nutrition standard should follow the 35-10-35 formula that I described previously and which is the focal point of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. It is a standard that we at Mars believe is meaningful, practicable, and would generate significant support across the nutrition community and from progressive companies in the food industry.

We recognize that one of the vexing issues in the past few years has been how to develop these new standards. In our opinion, the time to act is now and we look forward to working with the Committee to draft legislative language to ensure that new national school nutrition standards are implemented as quickly as possible.

As a private, family-owned company, we have a unique ability within the global food industry to be forward thinking and invest for the long-term in product development and research. And I'm pleased with the work we've done to advance transparency and choice for all consumers and to provide more nutritious options to school children, as well as all of our actions to address concerns related to health and nutrition.

Mars is proud to participate in this hearing and we believe it is our responsibility to provide industry leadership on such an important issue for our nation's children. Likewise, we are proud to be one of the first food companies to endorse a national school standard. We look forward to working with you and your committee to advance this effort in the Congress.

Mr. Chairman, a new national school nutrition standard will dramatically change the food that children have access to at school. A number of companies already have products designed to meet these guidelines. Over time – as schools, distributors and additional companies adopt these guidelines – millions of children will gain access to healthier snacks in schools, with the goal of leading to healthier and more nutritious diets.

On behalf of the 55 million children attending schools across this nation who stand to benefit the most from this standard, again, Mars thanks you for your leadership.