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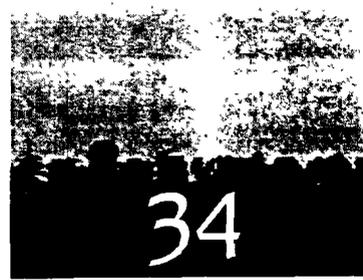


18



26

EXTREME  
OBESSE



34

## FINDINGS

### 2 MARKETS AND TRADE

U.S. Fruit and Vegetable Imports Outpace Exports  
Future of Preferential Trade Programs Concerns  
Developing Countries  
China's New Farm Policies Have Modest Impact

### 4 DIET AND HEALTH

Companies Continue To Offer New Foods  
Targeted to Children  
After Leaving Welfare: Food Stamps or Not?

### 6 FARMS, FIRMS, AND HOUSEHOLDS

Ag Productivity Drives Output Growth  
Production Shifting to Very Large Family Farms  
Ag Biotech Patents on the Move

### 8 RURAL AMERICA

Rural America as a Retirement Destination  
Most Low Education Counties Are in the  
Nonmetro South

### 10 DATA FEATURE

Milestones in U.S. Farming and Farm Policy

### 42 INDICATORS

Selected statistics on agriculture and trade,  
diet and health, natural resources, and  
rural America

### 46 GLEANINGS

Snapshots of recent events at ERS, highlights  
of new publications, and previews of research  
in the works

### 48 PROFILES

Recent accolades for ERS staff

## FEATURES

### 12 Will 2005 Be the Year of the Whole Grain?

Jean Buzby, Hodan Farah, and Gary Vocke

### 18 North America Moves Toward One Market

Steven Zahniser

### 26 Obesity Policy and the Law of Unintended Consequences

Fred Kuchler, Elise Golan, Jayachandran N. Variyam,  
and Stephen R. Crutchfield

### 34 Why Hasn't Crop Insurance Eliminated Disaster Assistance?

Robert Dismukes and Joseph Glauber



# Will 2005 Be the Year of the Whole Grain?

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Will 2005 be the year of the whole grain? According to the new *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, it should be. For the first time, the *Dietary Guidelines* have specific recommendations for whole grain consumption separate from those for refined grains. The *Guidelines*, released in January 2005, encourage all Americans over 2 years old to eat at least three 1-ounce-equivalent servings of whole grains each day, or roughly half of their recommended 5 to 10 daily servings of grains, depending on calorie needs.

The goal of this new recommendation is to improve Americans' health by raising awareness of whole grains and their role in nutritious diets. The *Guidelines* could also, however, have big impacts on farmers and farm production. How big depends on consumers' and manufacturers' responses.

**Will Consumers Follow the Guidelines?**

Historical eating trends, and the popularity of diets, demonstrate that consumers do modify their food choices in response to diet and health information. For example, in response to health warnings about consuming too much saturated fat, per capita consumption of whole milk declined by 70 percent between 1970 and 2003, while consumption of lower fat and skim milk increased by 140 percent. However, trends in overall fat consumption suggest that some dietary advice is ignored. Total per capita consumption of added fats and oils has risen 63 percent since 1970, despite widespread health warnings.

The new whole-grain recommendations are ambitious, given Americans' current eating patterns. Though Americans have been eating more grain products, they consume few whole grains. According to ERS food availability data, Americans

were eating, on average, 10 servings of grains a day in 2003—only 1 of which was whole grains. Whole-grain data are incomplete, as information on some whole grains, such as buckwheat and quinoa, are not available.

Whether consumers embrace whole grains involves weighing their attributes—taste, convenience, availability, price, and perceived health benefits—relative to other food choices. For most consumers, taste is the deciding factor, as shown by years of survey data from the Food Marketing Institute. Whole-grain products that fail to pass the consumer taste test will have difficulty competing against refined products that do.

Convenience may also be an issue for some consumers. Many whole grains require longer preparation and cooking time than refined grains. For example, brown rice takes 25 minutes longer to cook than white. For some consumers, availability may also hinder whole-grain consumption, though less so now that whole-grain products are increasingly plentiful in places other than health food stores and mail-order companies.

Cost is another consideration. Historically, some whole-grain products were more expensive because they were specialty items produced in smaller quantities. A 2001 ERS study found that the average supermarket price for whole-wheat or whole-grain bread in 1999 was \$1.38 per pound, versus \$1.15 for non-whole-grain bread. Brown rice cost \$1.16 per pound, versus \$0.72 for nonwhole-grain rice. A more recent ERS analysis puts the average cost of whole-grain/whole-wheat bread at \$1.99 per pound in 2003, versus \$1.66 per pound for white bread. Where they exist, price spreads above industrywide thin profit margins may provide an unexpected benefit to food manufacturers who produce whole-grain products. However, any price spread will likely be short-lived as more manufacturers join the whole-grain market.

**Consumers Confused Over Labels and Serving Sizes**

For consumers who follow the *Guidelines* and decide to eat more whole grains, constraints may remain. Even motivated consumers may have difficulty meeting dietary recommendations because it is often tough to tell which



VOLUME 9 • ISSUE 3

4

