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About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with an office in Geneva.

Cheap food policy contributing to childhood obesity

New article in Health Affairs journal outlines needed reforms

MINNEAPOLIS – A decades-old “cheap food” policy has helped create a broken U.S. food system where unhealthy foods are both cheaper and more available to children than are healthy foods, writes the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy’s David Wallinga, M.D. in a new article in the March issue of the influential journal, *Health Affairs*. The article comes out after first lady Michelle Obama, along with Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and others, launched a national initiative to address childhood obesity last month.

Dr. Wallinga’s article traces the role of U.S. agriculture policy in promoting the overproduction of certain farm commodities like corn and soybeans. These cheap commodities have been converted into calorie-rich but nutrient-poor snacks, sweets and sweetened beverages that have led to an excess of daily calories for all Americans, children and adults alike. For that reason, Dr. Wallinga calls U.S. farm policy a “cheap calorie” policy.

“As a nation, we must understand that farm policy is public health policy,” said Dr. Wallinga. “We need to transition from a cheap calorie farm policy to one that nourishes our children’s health. It’s going to take steps across the food system and at every level of government to not only bend the curve on the obesity epidemic, but to reverse it.”

The article outlines policy recommendations that could help manage commodity crop oversupply and support farmers. It calls for federal policy to treat farmers as allies in the fight against child obesity, by removing hurdles to growing more healthy fruits and vegetables. Congressional leaders have already launched public discussion around the next omnibus Farm Bill, due in 2012.

The March issue of *Health Affairs* examines the childhood obesity epidemic in the United States, analyzing causes of the growing problem and proposing the best available solutions to ensure a healthier future for America’s children. A *Health Affairs* briefing at the National Press Club today features Dr. Wallinga, and several other national experts including: William H. Dietz, Director of the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and Jonathan D. Klein, Associate Executive Director of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

David Wallinga, MD, MPA, is Director of the Food and Health program at IATP. He is also currently a William T. Grant Foundation Distinguished Fellow in Food Systems and Public Health at University of Minnesota, School of Public Health. The Health Affairs issue, along with Dr. Wallinga's article, is available (subscription required) at: <http://www.healthaffairs.org/>.

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