

» PROCESSING AND NUTRITION: CHOOSING THE RIGHT LENS FOR POLICY



Manufacturers across the food and beverage supply chain work hard every day to provide safe and nutritious products that are affordable and accessible to all Americans. From small, family-owned companies to some of the world's biggest brands, manufacturers support and enable nutrition policies grounded in sound science that help Americans eat well and stay healthy.

Proposals to define and regulate so-called “highly processed” or “ultra-processed” foods would shift food policy away from established, nutrient-based standards and categorize food and beverages with a label that judges them by how they are made rather than what nutrition they provide. This will add complexity for manufacturers, confuse consumers, increase food costs, limit consumer choice, and reduce access to affordable options—all without clear evidence of improving public health.

A Processing-Based Definition Is the Wrong Tool for Better Nutrition

Many widely consumed products rely on processing to keep food safe from bacteria, extend shelf-life, preserve or add important nutrients, and keep food affordable and available year-round. Food processing—whether pasteurization, aseptic packaging, or the use of ingredients such as emulsifiers derived from plants—has enabled a safe, abundant and nutritious food supply in the U.S. while limiting food waste.

Processing methods alone do not determine a food's contribution to a balanced diet. As such, labeling foods based on how they are made versus what nutrients they contain can obscure nutritional value. Introducing new terms into labeling policy or food assistance programs could unintentionally mislead consumers by suggesting that processing itself is harmful, even when it improves safety, quality, or nutrition.

Existing regulatory frameworks already provide consumers with clear, standardized information through ingredient lists, nutrition facts labels, and federal safety reviews. Adding a new, vague category like “highly processed” or “ultra-processed” foods based on inconsistent research would likely make food labels harder to understand, not easier, and could steer consumers away from nutritious foods that fit within healthy eating patterns.

Higher Costs and Reduced Access

The U.S. food and beverage supply chain is designed for efficiency and maintaining dependable, abundant, and affordable choices for consumers. If foods are labeled or restricted based on processing, manufacturers may need to reformulate products or change packaging and distribution—disrupting supply chains and increasing both food prices and food waste. These impacts hit low-income families, rural communities, and small and mid-sized manufacturers the hardest.

Policies meant to improve health should be grounded in clear evidence of public health benefits and be designed carefully so they do not make food more expensive or harder to find.

A Better Approach

Manufacturers support nutrition policies that:

- Focus on nutrient content such as fiber, protein, and vitamins, rather than level of processing
- Look at the whole diet and total caloric intake, not single foods in isolation
- Rely on science, not subjective labels that sound alarming and do not reflect overall nutritional value

› THE BOTTOM LINE:

Food policies based on nutrition rather than process will help consumers make informed choices, avoid the unintended consequences of higher costs or reduced access to food and beverages without clear health benefits, and support a strong, innovative U.S. manufacturing sector that drives economic growth and helps feed American families.