

## **How Far is Too Far for Health Care Reform?**

*By Tracy Taylor Grondine*

Singling out one food ingredient to help revamp the nation's health care system is not only single-minded and unwarranted, but it would go too far and is unlikely to reduce obesity in this country. Such injustice can be seen in a new congressional proposal to use a sugar-sweetened beverage excise tax to help fund health care reform.

"Expanding Health Care Coverage: Proposals to Provide Affordable Coverage to All Americans," which was recently released by the Senate Finance Committee, targets agriculture, among other industries, as a means to pay for changes to our health care system.

Agriculture's role in the obesity problem plaguing our country has been a controversial topic for some time. Typically it has been high fructose corn syrup that has been the bull's eye for critics, but this latest proposal moves the needle by not only levying a tax on HFCS, but also sugar and other sweeteners (non-caloric sweeteners would be exempt). This new attack on sweeteners is disturbing to Farm Bureau.

In the words of AFBF President Bob Stallman to members of the Senate Finance Committee, "Such a tax is an over-simplified attempt to address a problem that goes far beyond consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages." By ignoring the fact that our nation's battle of the bulge is rooted in many factors, including a lack of exercise and poor nutrition education, lawmakers are trying to strike a get-rich-quick scheme without finding a true remedy to obesity. Singling out specific food ingredients for taxation is not going to encourage Americans to become more active or teach them how to make better food choices.

Such a tax also fails to recognize that the nutritional benefits of some sugar-sweetened beverages can outweigh any increase in calories due to the use of sugar as an ingredient. Fruit and vegetable juices and flavored milk can provide important nutrients, but both would be penalized under this tax. To discourage the consumption of nutritious products simply because of the moderate use of a single ingredient misses the point. Consumers should be encouraged to consume juices and milk, not discouraged through a tax from drinking these healthful beverages.

Because of the rapidly increasing cost of health care, taxing sugar to increase federal revenues could be tempting. While the proposal does not provide a specific tax amount, it's estimated that a tax of 3 cents per 12 ounces could raise as much as \$50 billion over 10 years. So even if this proposal doesn't make the cut this go-round, it's likely we will see it resurrected in the future unless the grassroots fights it hard the first time around by contacting their senators to voice opposition.

We all know that taxing sugar and sweetener products is not a one-stop fix to the nation's health care problems. But, it shouldn't even be considered as a component of a solution. Instead, we need to find real answers instead of penalizing America's farmers and consumers by going too far.