

## Tax on junk food can help pay the costs of diet-related diseases

By Ronnie Cummins

FINLAND, Minn. — America's industrial food and farming system – dominated by fast-food restaurants and processed, chemical-laden food – has precipitated a public health crisis.

Although nutritionists recommend that consumers avoid eating unhealthy junk foods, every day 75 million Americans "supersize" themselves and damage their health by eating at fast-food restaurants.

Forty percent of American meals are now bought and consumed outside the home, typically consisting of high-calorie, low-nutrition items such as soft drinks, French fries, and low-grade meat laced with fat, cheap sweeteners, pesticide residues, chemical additives and salt.

We have become a Fast Food Nation of bulging waistlines and high blood pressures.

Recent studies link pesticide residues and chemical additives like MSG in processed foods and restaurant fare to hormone disruption and obesity. No wonder 60 percent of Americans are either overweight or obese. Consider these distressing facts:

—One in every three children born since the year 2000 will develop diabetes in their lifetime.

—Diet-related obesity, diabetes and heart disease are now the nation's No. 1 public health problem, generating an estimated \$150 billion in health-care costs every year.

—Millions of youths and adults have literally become addicted to the chemically enhanced junk food served in fast-food restaurants, school lunchrooms and institutional cafeterias.

—In 1972, U.S. consumers spent \$3 billion a year on fast food; today we spend more than \$110 billion.

The junk-food industry, now under attack by public health advocates and parents, finds itself in

a similar position to where the tobacco industry was in the 1990s. After decades of lies and industry propaganda, the truth is finally coming out: junk food kills.

Indeed, despite individual efforts by some states to tax soda pop, require healthier school lunches or mandate calorie information in chain restaurants, obesity rates in the United States are growing.

It is time for the federal government to stop subsidizing, with billions of dollars of public tax money, the factory-farmed crops and animal products such as corn, soybeans, cotton, dairy and meat that create the artificially low-prices that prop up the nation's junk food industry.

We need to subsidize healthy organic food, not junk food, and promote sustainable food and farming practices, instead of subsidizing factory farms and chemical-intensive farming and food processing.

We need to provide physical education, cooking, nutrition and gardening classes in our schools, and ban or restrict the advertising of junk foods in the mass media.

We need to teach children and adults alike to eat less meat and fatty foods and instead to increase their consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains. It is time to put a surgeon general's warning on junk foods. It's time to come to grips with the fact that we have allowed the junk-food industry and the mass media to brainwash our youths and turn them into fast-food addicts.

Studies have shown that school organic gardens, salad bars and healthy lunches improve the health and academic performance of young people. Healthy eating habits and gardening skills nurtured and developed at an early age most often have a lifetime impact.

So yes, let's slap a heavy tax on junk food served at fast-food restaurants and in school

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cafeterias. A 100 percent tax on junk food and beverages would help pay for the collateral damages of this industry: the \$150 billion in diet-related disease and health-care costs now incurred by the public and taxpayers for obesity and diabetes.

But of course we shouldn't hold our breath for Washington's indentured politicians, who receive millions of dollars in campaign donations from Big Food Inc., to take action. We're going to have to organize at the grassroots and local level and fight for public health every step of the way, just like we've done with the tobacco industry.

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**ABOUT THE WRITER**

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