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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

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<http://help.senate.gov>

February 11, 2013

Dr. Margaret Hamburg
Commissioner
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
10903 New Hampshire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20993

Dear Commissioner Hamburg:

I write today to draw your attention to the threat posed to Americans' health by excess consumption of sodium and trans fat and to urge your action on these issues.

As you know, 90 percent of Americans eat more sodium than is recommended for a healthy diet – and this overconsumption has staggering costs, both in terms of lives and money. High levels of sodium consumption contribute to hypertension, which 90 percent of Americans will develop over their lifetime, and can increase the risk of heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease. But we know that these trends can be reversed: upwards of 100,000 lives could be saved annually if sodium levels in packaged and restaurant foods—the source of most of the sodium Americans consume—were cut in half. Furthermore, direct medical costs would drop by an estimated \$18 billion per year by reducing sodium consumption from 3,400 mg to 2,300 mg per day and by \$28 billion per year if further reduced to 1,500 mg per day.

In the context of this sobering reality, two years ago the Institute of Medicine (IOM) issued a landmark report outlining strategies to reduce sodium. The report recommended that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) set mandatory limits, phased in gradually over time, on the sodium content of packaged and restaurant foods. That recommendation came after the IOM concluded that a voluntary industry approach to sodium reduction had made insufficient progress over the previous 40 years. I understand that the FDA has been studying the sodium issue and that the Institute of Medicine is finalizing their newest review of certain aspects of sodium and health. Upon completion of that report, I urge the FDA to act swiftly to implement strong regulations that would substantially cut sodium levels in processed and restaurant foods and save tens of thousands of lives annually.

Like excess sodium, artificial trans fat poses a serious health threat by increasing blood cholesterol and the risk of heart disease, the number-one cause of death for Americans. The 2010 (and previous) Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that Americans should keep their trans fat intake as low as possible. Further, the FDA acknowledged nearly a decade ago that each year trans fat causes thousands of premature fatal heart attacks. Today we know that

those deaths are unnecessary, and that many could be prevented by a phase-out of partially hydrogenated oil and the trans fat that it contains. Here too, we know that progress is possible: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently found a 58% decline in trans fat in blood samples between 2000 and 2009. According to CDC, these findings demonstrate the effectiveness of efforts to reduce trans fat and “highlight that further reductions in the levels of trans fats must remain an important public health goal.” To this end, FDA should deny the “generally recognized as safe” status of partially hydrogenated oil and get it out of the food supply, thus eliminating the very real harm being done to the health of Americans.

I hope you’ll take expedient action on both of these pressing issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tom Harkin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "T" and "H".

Tom Harkin
Chairman, Senate HELP Committee

CC: The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius