The advisory panel on nutrition ruffled some congressional feathers by taking environmental impacts into account. The panel's report concludes that "a dietary pattern that is higher in plant-based foods, such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds, and lower in animal-based foods is more health promoting and is associated with lesser environmental impact than is the current average U.S. diet." There are also big differences among animal-based products. Pound for pound, "beef is associated with more than twice the carbon emissions of pork, nearly three times that of turkey and almost four times that of chicken."

In a report released in August by the Berkeley environmental law center, Romany Webb and Steve Weissman explored ways that USDA could address sustainability, including through use of the nutritional guidelines. But Congress created some confusion on this point when it passed an omnibus funding bill in December. The "explanatory statement" accompanying the bill states:

"There is concern that the advisory committee for the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans is considering issues outside of the nutritional focus of the panel. The advisory committee is showing an interest in incorporating agriculture production practices and environmental factors into their criteria for establishing the next dietary recommendations. The agreement expects the Secretary to ensure that the advisory committee focuses on nutrient and dietary recommendations based upon sound nutrition science. The agreement directs the Secretary to only include nutrition and dietary information, not extraneous factors, in the final 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans."

I haven't been able to find any corresponding restrictions on the use of appropriations in the language of the appropriations act itself. In any event, explanatory statement itself seems to leave a lot of wiggle room. The part about the advisory committee was only an "expectation." Even the strong language about the final guidelines says only that the guidelines can't explicitly include environmental information. It doesn't say that the reasons for the recommendations can't include environmental considerations.

Agribusiness has been notoriously successful in evading the kinds of environmental rules that apply to every other industry. It has also profited handsomely from an unhealthy American diet that has produced an epidemic of obesity. The advisory committee's recommendations are small but welcome step in the right direction.