Better regulation of food industry is needed to improve health, experts say

David Payne

Food policy experts have called for the state to regulate the industry and not to shy away from taxation as an alternative to the current UK government’s “nudge” approach to public health.

Fifty two per cent of delegates attending London City University’s second annual symposium on the future direction of UK food policy voted for the state to take a stronger leadership role.

The vote at the symposium, attended by 190 delegates, followed a discussion from panellists including industry representatives David Croft, director of food technology at supermarket chain Waitrose, and Melanie Leach, director of the Food and Drink Federation.

Ms Leach said the food industry, which employs 400 000 people in the UK and has a £73bn (€87bn; $113bn) turnover, had delivered on both public health and carbon reduction targets in advance of legislation.

But in the case of salt reduction, some manufacturers who had led the way could only go so far because they risked losing their market share if consumers switched to rival companies whose products had higher salt levels, she added.

Ms Leach said the food industry needed “incentives and penalties” and “a science based debate about new technologies that reached rational conclusions that did not tap into people’s emotions and prejudices.”

She also commended the voluntary sector for “naming, praising, and shaming.”

Erik Millstone, professor in science and technology policy at the University of Sussex, accused the industry of wanting both stable regulation and the flexibility to innovate, and he warned that any regulatory framework was bound to change as new hazards are discovered.

He also criticised an over-reliance on science and potential conflicts of interests, saying “Science does not speak with one voice,” citing scientific opposition to genetically modified food in Austria, because of the role organic food plays in the country’s economy.

Professor Millstone also criticised the regulatory regime established by the Labour government in 2000 when it set up the Food Standards Agency as a non-ministerial government department. The agency lost its nutrition and food labelling remit after the coalition government was elected last May.

The FSA, he said, was meant to be the consumer champion, but its remit was diluted. Within three years most of its board members were from the food industry, and members of its independent expert advisory committees could also act as paid consultants to the food industry, he claimed.

He added: “The FSA board never receives advice from its staff that it doesn’t want to receive. They are entirely unaccountable. For example, they have not appeared before the Commons health select committee.”

Conservative MP Laura Sandys told the event that food policy needed a “Whitehall refit” after listing the different government departments with an interest in food policy and regulation (Defra, international development, health, foreign office, education and skills, and business). Issues to do with price volatility and security also impacted on the Treasury, she added.

Felicity Lawrence, special correspondent at the Guardian newspaper, said: “The current government isn’t going to regulate or intervene in public health or regulating the food industry. What they have very clearly signalled is the removal of the state from all these areas.”

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