End the Gridlock

Newspapers write about “gridlock in Washington,” referring to the virtual impossibility of getting Democrats and Republicans in Congress to agree on anything. But there’s another kind of gridlock going on: the Obama administration’s failure to issue new regulations to implement laws that have already been passed.

Twenty months ago, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (the non-profit publisher of Nutrition Action Healthletter) helped successfully shepherd three important laws through Congress. One aimed at making the food supply safer, another at requiring chain restaurants to list calories on their menus, and a third at making school foods healthier.

But passing a law isn’t enough. The government has to issue regulations that say precisely what the legislation will require. And that has happened for only one of the laws.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act will start going into effect this month (albeit with start dates only vaguely defined). The administration is ignoring the deadlines in the food-safety law, notwithstanding successful lawsuits from the supermarket industry and movie-theater and vending-machine operators who are trying to escape the full force of the law. The paralysis may go even deeper. The White House’s fear of offending industry and triggering a backlash in Congress apparently kept the Food and Drug Administration from reducing sodium levels in packaged and restaurant foods and getting rid of partially hydrogenated oil—the source of artificial trans fat.

Likewise, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is sitting on its proposals for getting rid of junk foods from school vending machines, hallways, and stores. And thanks to lobbying by food manufacturers, restaurants, and broadcasters, the government has dropped its proposed voluntary guidelines to discourage companies from marketing junk foods to kids.

In July, The Pew Charitable Trusts, CSPI, and others ran full-page newspaper ads urging the Obama administration to act on food safety. Will the logjams break after the November election? Stay tuned.

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