



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on April 21, 2010

Big Brother and the Salt Fix

The Washington Post has reported that federal regulators are planning to push for the gradual reduction in the amount of salt in foods that Americans consume. This plan would address the amount of salt in processed food, although the federally allowable salt limits had not yet been set. The Food and Drug Administration plans to work in concert with the United States Department of Agriculture to reduce salt consumption by Americans.



Eating too much salt has been linked to hypertension, heart disease and related health problems. Last month, the corporate giant PepsiCo, which owns Pepsi, Frito-Lay, and Quaker, announced voluntary plans to reduce the salt content of its products by twenty-five percent by 2015. Undoubtedly other major food processing companies will be pressured into similar actions.

While it is true that excessive consumption of salt can be a serious health problem for many Americans, the extent of the potential harm has thus far been determined by a physician and his patient, guided by personal medical history, laboratory and other tests, and the balancing of those risks.

Salt is, of course, essentially not only for good health but for life itself. In the ancient world, salt was a form of wealth. In fact, the Latin word "salarium," from which we derive the word "salt," is the root word for our modern word "salary." Roman soldiers received salt as a component of their compensation. Taken in excess, salt, like almost any other good thing in life, can be harmful.

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The private sector, however, has already responded to medical research about the potential hazard to some people of too much salt. Low salt products are produced by many food processing companies, just as low sugar, low fat, and low carbohydrate foods have been offered for years in supermarkets. The flexible and amendable private sector has also produced a variety of foods for lactose intolerant people just as it has produced hypoallergenic products for millions of Americans with various allergies.

It is not exactly clear what, except for federal intrusion, regulations limiting salt in processed foods would accomplish. Americans routinely add salt or pepper to their foods, to provide the most pleasing taste. Restaurants provided salt and pepper as gratis condiments for patrons as well. Many meals are prepared at home, and salt can be added by cooks to suit family tastes. Unless federal regulation extends into the family kitchen or unless salt is rationed by government, it would seem like forcing big corporations to limit salt would simply shift salt consumption to some other level of cooking and eating food.



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It is also would seem that limiting salt in processed foods could violate ethnic and perhaps religious injunctions. Kosher food, for example, often contains significant amounts of sodium. The preparation of that food for marketing requires the supervision of appropriate rabbinical authorities. Are these now going to be governed by federal regulators instead?

Even more ominous is the idea of federal regulators determining what is best for our health. Many Americans drink more alcohol than they should. The logical federal answer to this very real and very serious health problem would be regulation, rationing, or even banning alcohol — and the results of prohibition was an explosion in organized crime in America.

If what we consume is the business of Washington, then the amount of exercise we engage in should logically be federal matters as well. There is, in fact, no clear and logical place to stop federal regulation of our health if Washington insists that the voluntary and salutary actions of private enterprise to medical problems of hypertension and heart attack and the choices of free citizens in response to that are not enough. Salt, one of the basic building blocks of civilized life, may soon be the province not of free men and women but of Big Brother.



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