THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the First Lady

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For Immediate Release                           March 16, 2010

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY

AT A GROCERY MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

Grand Hyatt Hotel

Washington, D.C.

11:40 A.M. EDT

MRS. OBAMA:  Thank you.  (Applause.)  Thank you, everyone.  Thank you so much.  (Applause.)  And Rick, thank you for that very kind introduction.  I enjoyed our meeting, as well.  And thanks to all of you for having me here at this year’s Science Forum.  It is a true pleasure to with all of you today.  And I hope you get out and see a little sunshine, because we have some.

I understand you’ve gathered here in Washington this week to discuss some of the most pressing issues that your industry faces.  And I’m very pleased to see that your agenda today includes sessions about helping customers meet their lifestyle needs and about advancing America’s public health, because the topic that I’d like to discuss with you today –- the epidemic of childhood obesity -– falls at the intersection of these two issues.

Now, I know you’re all familiar with the statistics here: how childhood obesity rates have tripled over the past three decades –- nearly one in three children in this country are now overweight or obese.  And you all know the health consequences –- from hypertension to heart disease, cancer to diabetes.

And I know you’re well aware of the economic consequences: how we’re currently spending billions of dollars treating obesity-related conditions -– costs that many of your companies pay in the form of rising health care expenses; expenses that will only continue to rise and affect your bottom lines if we fail to act.

But you also know that this is a relatively new phenomenon, because back when many of us were growing up, we tended to be able to lead lives that kept us at a pretty healthy weight.  Most of us walked to and from school every day, and then we ran around all day at recess, in gym class, and then for hours after school before dinner.  We usually ate more sensibly.  Oftentimes we had home-cooked meals with reasonable portion sizes -– and like it or not, there was always a vegetable on the plate.  And fast food was a rare treat.  Snacking between meals was frowned upon.  I mean, we all had our share of soda, chips and desserts, but certainly not every day, and not at every meal.

But our kids today lead a very different kind of life.  Those walks to and from school have been replaced by car and bus rides.  Gym class and school sports have been cut, replaced by afternoons with the TV, and video games, and the Internet.

And while parents want to provide healthy food for their kids, many of them are working longer hours, or some of them more than one job -- so they just can’t swing those home-cooked meals anymore.

And today, snacking between meals has become more the norm rather than the exception.  And while kids 30 years ago ate just one snack a day, we’re now trending toward three –- so our kids are taking in an additional 200 calories a day just from snacks alone.  And one in five school-age kids has up to six snacks a day.

And portion sizes have exploded.  Food portions are two to five times bigger than they used to be.  And beverage portions have grown as well.  In the mid-1970s, the average sweetened drink portions were about 13.6 ounces.  And today, our kids think nothing of drinking 20 ounces of soda at a time.

As of 2006, folks were spending about 22 percent of their grocery dollars on sweets, salty snacks, and desserts -- and that’s compared to a little over 12 percent on fruits and vegetables.

All told, we’re eating 31 percent more calories than we were just 40 years ago –- and that’s including 56 percent more fats and oil and 14 percent more sugars and sweeteners.  In fact, we now add sweeteners to all kinds of products in amounts unimaginable just a generation ago.

So sometimes, when we buy the foods that our parents bought us, we don’t realize that they’re not always as healthy as they used to be.  And today, the average American is actually eating 15 more pounds of sugar compared to a year -- than they were back in 1970.

So it’s just gotten to the point where we as parents know that things have gotten out of balance.  And we know that many of our kids aren’t as healthy and active as they should be.  And we desperately want to do the right things.  But we’re inundated with conflicting information.  Our kids sometimes are bombarded by ads for unhealthy products.  And many folks in this country are struggling to find foods that are both healthy for their kids but affordable for their families.

And I know what that’s like, because I’ve been there.  Now, while today I have way more help and support than I could have ever imagined, I didn’t always live in the White House.  You remember.  I didn’t have all these resources.

And it wasn’t long ago that I was a working mom dashing from meetings and phone calls, ballet and soccer and whatever else.  I felt like it was a miracle just to get through the day and get everybody where they were supposed to be.

So the last thing I had time to do was to stand in a grocery store aisle squinting at ingredients that I couldn’t pronounce to figure out whether something was healthy or not.  Like many busy parents, I was shopping primarily for convenience and cost.  I bought products that were pre-packaged, pre-cut, pre-cooked.  If it was “pre,” I was getting it -- (laughter) -- because I was looking for anything that was quick and easy to prepare and to consume.  And I was grateful for the time and the effort that I saved with these kinds of products.

But I was also completely unaware that all that extra convenience sometimes made it just a little too easy for me to eat too much, for my kids to eat too much, and to eat too often.  And like so many families, my family fell into the habit of living that “grab-and-go” lifestyle, eating more and more between meals.  And slowly, all of those extra calories really just started to add up.

Now, I’m not saying by any means that we should try to turn back the clock to how things were when we were kids, because those days are long gone.  And life is far more complicated these days.

And I also know that we can’t solve this problem by passing a bunch of laws in Washington.  I’ve talked to a lot of experts about this issue, and not a single one has said that the solution is for the federal government to tell people what to do.

But what we can do is that we can help families make changes that fit with their budgets, with their schedules, with their needs, and with their tastes.

What we can do is bring together all of us -- governors, mayors, doctors, nurses, businesses, non-profits, educators, parents, all of us -- to tackle this challenge once and for all.

And what we can do is finally make this national public health threat a national priority.

And that’s why we launched “Let’s Move” –- a nationwide campaign to rally this country around a single and very ambitious goal:  to solve the problem of childhood obesity in a generation, so that kids born today will reach adulthood at a healthy weight.

With “Let’s Move,” we’re issuing a call to action.  We are telling everyone let’s move to give parents the information they need to make better decisions for their kids.  Let’s move to get healthier food into our schools.  Let’s move to get more supermarkets into underserved areas so that all Americans have access to fresh, nutritious foods.  And probably most importantly, let’s move to help our kids be more physically active -- both in and out of school.

But here’s the thing –- we can build shiny new supermarkets on every block, but we need those supermarkets to actually provide healthy options at prices people can afford.  And we can insist that our schools serve better food, but we need to actually produce that food.  And we can give parents all the information in the world, but they still won’t have time to untangle labels filled with 10-syllable words or do long division with these portion sizes.

And that’s really where all of you come in.  As you know, you all produce much of the food that our children eat –- and have marketed to them -- each day.  The decisions you make determine what’s in our grocery store shelves, what’s in our school lunches, and what’s in the thousands of advertisements our kids are exposed to each year.  And I know that many of you are undertaking efforts to significantly reformulate your products -– and I hope that the time will come when all of you are.

Many of you are also working to educate kids about good nutrition, and to limit advertisements for certain products to our children.  And I know that a number of you -- and I’ve met several of the committee -- have come together to create the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation to help address the issue of childhood obesity.  So there are so many good examples, wonderful examples, of folks beginning to move in the right direction.  It’s very exciting.

But I’m here today to urge all of you to move faster and to go farther, because the truth is we don’t have a moment to waste -- because a baby born today could be less than a decade away from showing the first signs of high cholesterol, high blood pressure, Type II diabetes, if he or she is obese as a child.  A recent study even found that three-year-olds who were obese already had one of the symptoms of heart disease.

So we need you all to step it up.  We all need to step up in this country.  This is a shared responsibility.  That’s why I’ve gone to parents and I’ve asked them to do their part.  They have a responsibility to watch what their kids eat and teach good habits.  I’ve asked medical professionals to do their part.  They have a responsibility to screen kids for obesity and help parents with these issues.  Educators have a responsibility to build healthy schools.  Governors and mayors have a responsibility to build healthy communities.  And all of you have a responsibility as well.

And we need you not just to tweak around the edges, but to entirely rethink the products that you’re offering, the information that you provide about these products, and how you market those products to our children.

That starts with revamping or ramping up your efforts to reformulate your products, particularly those aimed at kids, so that they have less fat, salt, and sugar, and more of the nutrients that our kids need.

And I understand that this is easier said than done.  This doesn’t happen overnight.  We all know that human beings -- I, for one, know -- are hard-wired to crave sugary, fatty, salty foods.  And it is temping to take advantage of that –- to create products that are sweeter, richer, and saltier than ever before.

But doing so doesn’t just respond to people’s natural inclinations -- it also actually helps to shape them.  And this can be particularly dangerous when it comes to our kids, because as all of you know, as parents, the more of these products they have in their diets, the more accustomed they become to those tastes, and then the more deeply embedded these foods become in their eating habits.

But here’s the good news:  It can also work the other way around as well.  Just as we can shape our children’s preferences for high-calorie, low-nutrient foods -- with a lot of persistence, we can also turn them on to high-quality, healthier foods as well.

But the only way we can do this is to work together.  And this needs to be a serious industry-wide commitment to providing the healthier foods parents are looking for at prices they can afford.

And again, I know these changes will not happen overnight.  It’s going to take a lot of tries to come up with products that are both healthy and still palatable for our kids.  And that may mean some real creativity and effort on your part.

But what it doesn’t mean is taking out one problematic ingredient, only to replace it with another.  While decreasing fat is certainly a good thing, replacing it with sugar and salt isn’t.  And it doesn’t mean compensating for high amounts of problematic ingredients with small amounts of beneficial ones -- for example, adding a little bit of Vitamin C to a product with lots of sugar, or a gram of fiber to a product with tons of fat doesn’t suddenly make those products good for our kids.

This isn’t about finding creative ways to market products as healthy.  As you know, it’s about producing products that actually are healthy -- products that can help shape the health habits of an entire generation.

It’s also about giving parents the information they need to make good decisions about purchasing those products.  A recent survey by the FDA shows that the vast majority of Americans rely on labels to help them decide what foods to buy.  But we know those labels aren’t always as helpful as they could be.  And it’s hard enough to figure out whether any one food item is healthy.  It’s even harder to compare items.  And folks just don’t have the time to line products up side by side and figure out whether these compare or not.  And they shouldn’t have to.  Parents shouldn’t need a magnifying glass and a calculator to make healthy choices for their kids.

That’s why, as Rick said, we need clear, consistent, front-of-the-package labels that give people the information they’ve been asking for, in a format that they understand.  And I am so pleased that you all have committed to working with the FDA to develop these labels.  We are so eager to hear your thoughts and ideas of getting this done right.

And you know there’s absolutely no reason why we cannot find common ground on this issue.  This one’s a no-brainer, because this is the bare minimum we should do for our kids to help their parents make good choices.  And this fall the FDA is going to begin pursuing voluntary agreements from your companies, and I hope that all of you will join in on that effort.

But your role in helping address childhood obesity isn’t just limited to what you put in your products and how you label those products for parents.  It’s also about how you market those products to our kids.  Our kids didn’t learn about the latest sweets and snack foods on their own.  They hear about these products from advertisements on TV, the Internet, video games, schools, many other places.  And any parent knows this marketing is really effective.  We’ve all had to endure those impassioned pleas in the grocery store for one product or another.  Some of us have been treated to full-scale reenactments of TV commercials and jingles, word for word, right on key.  (Laughter.)

I was sharing with somebody -- I was talking to Sasha about who I was speaking to, and she said, “Who are these people?”  I said, “They make the food that we eat.”  “Oh, like Honey Nut Cheerios?  Part of a healthy breakfast?”  (Laughter.)  Like, all right, kid.

So this isn’t surprising when studies show that even a single commercial can impact a child’s brand preferences -- and that kids who see foods advertised on TV are significantly more likely to ask for them at the store.

So whatever we believe about personal responsibility and self-determination, I think we can all agree that it doesn’t apply to kids.

I think we can all agree that parents need more control over the products and messages their kids are exposed to.  Parents are working hard to provide a healthy diet and to teach healthy habits -- and we’d like to know that our efforts won’t be undermined every time our children turn on the TV or see a flashy display in a store.

Again, I know many of you have voluntarily committed to limit your marketing to children, which is a step in the right direction, an important step.  And I hope that those of you who haven’t will think about doing so as well.

But we also have to be honest.  Even with this commitment, a study found that last year, while there were fewer food ads in children’s programming, more than 70 percent of foods marketed to kids were still among the least healthy, with less than 1 percent being among the most healthy.

And in the face of these statistics, we have to ask ourselves, are we really making sufficient progress here?  Are we doing everything that we can to secure the health and future of our kids?

So today I want to challenge each and every one of you to go back to your companies, take a look at your marketing budgets and ask some questions.  For example, when you put money into reformulating a product to make it healthier, do you then invest enough in marketing that product to kids and parents?   Or is most of the marketing budget still going to the less healthy versions?  In other words, which products are you really selling?  And what kinds of messages are your advertisements sending?

As a mom, I know it is my responsibility -- and no one else’s -- to raise my kids.  But what does it mean when so many parents are finding that their best efforts are undermined by an avalanche of advertisements aimed at their kids?  And what are these ads teaching kids about food and nutrition?  That it’s good to have salty, sugary food and snacks every day -- breakfast, lunch, and dinner?  That dessert is an everyday food? That it’s okay to eat unhealthy foods because they’re endorsed by the cartoon characters our children love and the celebrities our teenagers look up to?

So let’s be clear, it’s not enough just to limit ads for foods that aren’t healthy.  It’s going to be so critical to increase marketing for foods that are healthy.

And if there is anyone here who can sell food to our kids, it’s you.  You know what gets their attention.  You know what makes that lasting impression.  You know what gets them to drive their parents crazy in the grocery store.  And I’m here today to ask you to use that knowledge and that power to our kids’ advantage.  I’m asking you to actively promote healthy foods and healthy habits to our kids.

And we know there’s a huge and growing market for these kind of foods.  I have yet to meet a single parent who doesn’t understand the threat of childhood obesity.  I’ve yet to meet a single parent who is not eager to buy healthier products.

And this administration is committed to doing the same.  As we reauthorize the Child Nutrition Act, we’re working to ensure that all food served in schools -- not just through the school meal program, but in a la carte lines and vending machines as well -- meets basic nutritional guidelines.  And we’re proposing a historic investment of $10 billion over the next 10 years to help fund these efforts.  And your support for this is going to make a huge difference in helping us get this done.

We’re also putting our money where our mouth is with an initiative to provide fresher, healthier food in all federal government workplaces.  And to give you an idea of the scope of that, just think, there are 2.7 million federal employees working at thousands of sites all across this country.  This can have a huge impact.

But in the end, as First Lady, this isn’t just a policy issue for me.  This is a passion.  This is my mission.  I am determined to work with folks across this country to change the way a generation of kids thinks about food and nutrition.

So if you all create the supply, we know there will be a demand.  And if you have any doubt about that, just look at what we did for the hula hoop.  (Laughter.)  I hula hooped.  (Laughter.)  The reality is that with so many people looking for healthier options, this isn’t just going to be a fad.  Hopefully, this is the future of food in this country.

So I hope all of you will help support our efforts.  I hope that you’ll embrace this future, because really that’s what this industry has always done.  Just think back to the early part of the last century when food manufacturers helped pass the first major federal law establishing basic standards for our food, beverages, and drugs.  Back then, consumers had little protection against unscrupulous manufacturers who tainted their products with all sorts of chemicals and fillers.  When these abuses came to light, Congress responded, drafting the 1906 Food and Drug Act.  And instead of opposing that law and instead of viewing it as a threat, many manufacturers decided to embrace it.

Companies like most of you that were already doing the right thing by making safe, quality products realized they stood to profit.  They also realized that increasing public trust and improving products all across the industry as a whole would benefit each of them individually.

And today, with the issue of childhood obesity, we all face a similar opportunity.  And you face it not just as food industry leaders, but you face it as parents who love your kids and as citizens who love this nation.  And in the end, I am hopeful that you will choose to make the changes that we need not just because they’re good for your company, but because they’re good for our country.

I know that you’ll do these things not just to fulfill your obligation to shareholders, but also because you have a sense of obligation to our children -- because the truth is, all of us are paying the cost of childhood obesity.  But the truth is also that we all will gain from addressing it once and for all.

So I hope that all of you will do your part to give our kids the future they deserve.  I’m proud of what’s happened through this industry so far.  The work together that we’ve done has been tremendous.  All of you come to this with the right heart and the right vision and the right passion.  My only urging is that we move faster, we go farther together.  And I’m looking forward to working with you all in the months and years ahead.

Thank you so much.  (Applause.)

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