AACCI Goes to Washington!
Update on a Recent Visit to the FDA, NIH, and USDA

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One of the proposed action steps from the January 2013 thought-leader meeting (Cereal Foods World, 58:80, 2013) related to “Unifying the Grains Health Benefits Message” was to have AACCI become more engaged with government agencies such as the USDA-ARS, NIFA, NIH, FDA, etc. to increase awareness of AACCI’s initiatives, priorities, and member contributions to cereal grain science, identify focus areas and priorities, and advocate for increased grain science research funding by federal agencies. Under the able leadership of Kellye Eversole (Eversole Associates), our AACCI representative in Washington, DC, a visit by AACCI leaders and members was organized for July 29 and 30, 2013, to meet with relevant federal agency leaders and representatives. The following individuals represented AACCI during the visit: Anne Birkett, AACCI Nutrition Division vice chair (Kellogg Co.); Bruce Hamaker, AACCI Board member (Purdue University); Julie Miller Jones, AACCI past-president and Whole Grains Working Group chair (St. Catherine University); Satya S. Jonnalagadda, AACCI Health Benefits of Grains Task Force chair and Nutrition Division past-chair (Kerry Ingredients & Flavours); Kathy Wiemer, AACCI Whole Grains Working Group member (General Mills Inc.); Glen Weaver, AACCI member and industry partner (ConAgra Foods Inc.); Michelle Bjerkness, AACCI director of operations; Amy Hope, AACCI executive vice president; and Kellye Eversole.

There were several objectives for the Washington visit: introduce AACCI to relevant federal agencies; educate these agencies about AACCI priorities and initiatives to find common ground; advocate for increased focus on and funding of grain science research; identify and advocate for grain health benefits research funding; and educate policy makers about the AACCI Whole Grains Working Group characterized and advocated its adoption in federal programs. A common goal of the discussions was to advocate for increased cereal grain science programs and funding to advance grain science research across the continuum and to encourage consumption of healthy grain foods.

AACCI has a long history of working with government agencies, especially the USDA and FDA, to develop and standardize methods and to promote research on cereal grains to positively impact agriculture and public health. Several examples of previous joint efforts between AACCI and these agencies include 1) the development of flour-enrichment standards to address deficiencies seen in World War II recruits; 2) documentation of the science surrounding oat bran and β-glucan soluble fiber health claims, including methods for measurement; and 3) developing a definition of a whole grain that has been used by the FDA in its guidance. AACCI’s efforts have helped both agencies carry out their charges to ensure a sufficient, nutritious, and safe food supply, including activities related to monitoring and regulating food labeling, such as those that indicate the composition of foods (e.g., fiber) and health claims, establishing dietary guidelines and standards, and providing science that is used to underpin dietary guidance in USDA nutrition programs. This is a tradition that needs to continue, and AACCI is well positioned to fulfill its mission by leveraging the strengths of its membership to advance cereal grain science and innovation to facilitate collaboration, research, education, and technical services.

Building on AACCI’s history of effectively working with federal agencies, the recent Washington visit was very timely in that we were able to highlight the role of AACCI in advancing cereal grain science research and increasing collaboration and its critical role, directly and indirectly, in influencing policy and regulations when funding and programs are being cut. AACCI’s initial definition of what a whole grain was adapted in the FDA “Draft Guidance to Industry on Whole Grain Labels.” When meeting with leaders from the FDA CFSAN Office of Nutrition, Labeling and Dietary Supplements, we were able to provide an update on the recently approved AACCI whole grain products characterization and encourage the agency to adopt this characterization to ensure standardization of what is considered a whole grain food in the marketplace. Not only was this work by the AACCI Whole Grains Working Group appreciated by the FDA, but we were also encouraged to submit comments on the draft guidance so the FDA can officially take them into consideration when finalizing its draft guidance.

Although nutrient deficiencies remain a problem in some sectors, there is also concern about the rising incidence of obe-
sity and attendant chronic diseases. Congress recently passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (PL 111-296), which increases federal authority over nutrition standards for foods in schools and food safety and mandates new education programs targeted at encouraging healthy eating. This act adds to earlier efforts called for by the surgeon general and invokes recommendations made in the 2005 and 2010 USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate, which include a recommendation that whole grains account for at least half of the daily grain servings consumed to help reduce the risk of heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other chronic diseases. Food companies, many of which are members of AACCI, have responded to the call for healthier options by including, among other ingredients, more whole grains in their food products. While whole grains have proven to be a critical aspect of a healthy diet, more research is needed to address remaining gaps in our understanding of the health benefits of grains and grain components.

During our visits to different USDA groups, including the Office of the Secretary; the Office of the Undersecretary of Research, Education and Economics; ARS; NIFA, etc., the AACCI team highlighted the need for more focused research and funding to better understand the role of cereal grains and grain components in health, as well as ways to advance public-private partnerships to encourage collaboration across the various sectors of grain research programs from farm to fork. Per the recommendations of the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology in its “Report to the President on Agricultural Preparedness and the Agriculture Research Enterprise,” which call for a new “innovation ecosystem” for agricultural research, the USDA is discussing the development of six national innovation centers to encourage more competitive research grants through a network of public-private agricultural institutes that would address pending challenges. The AACCI team encouraged the USDA undersecretary of research, education and economics and USDA national program directors and leaders to consider the establishment of a “Grain Center of Excellence” that would not only advance grain health benefits research, but also cereal grain research from farm to fork, such as grain breeding programs and healthier grain product development, as well as provide an opportunity to train young cereal scientists. The timing of the AACCI visit was fortuitous, since the secretary of agriculture was holding budget talks with his departments, and we were able to advocate for cereal grain science funding with key USDA leaders. This will not be a onetime request; to ensure funding for grain science research, AACCI and its members will need to be at the forefront with our education and communication efforts.

Several grain health benefits research gaps were identified, including a better understanding of

- The benefits of individual grains and grain components, including fiber
- The synergistic effects or interactions among grains and other dietary components that impact health outcomes
- The effects of different grains, grain-based foods, and grain components on digestive health and their influence on body weight regulation, glycemic regulation, and other metabolic outcomes
- The impacts of food processing and agronomic aspects on the nutritional profiles and health benefits of grain-based products

During our meetings with the USDA Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services group, we were also able to clarify the definition of whole grain, discuss the nutritional composition differences between whole and refined grains and between different grains, put forth the AACCI whole grain products characterization, and identify ways in which more grains could be incorporated into the nutrition programs funded by the USDA. This initial visit by AACCI to Washington, DC, has set the stage for future education and communication efforts by the association to advance cereal grain science. The team came away very encouraged by the discussions but fully recognizes that an ongoing dialog is required and that it will take a commitment by everyone involved to fulfill these objectives.