

THE CAPACITY OF CONGRESS TO ANALYZE FOOD ISSUES

INTRODUCTION

During the course of this OTA study, comments were made regarding the need for Congress to improve its capabilities to analyze current and emerging food issues and to review proposed legislation in the food, agriculture, and nutrition area. These suggestions were:

1. Congress should increase the analytical capabilities of the staffs of its agricultural committees and of the agricultural specialists in the Congressional Research Service. A group of several competent analysts capable of making its own studies should be available to Congress. (FAC report, Hearings, pp. 12-1 4.)
2. The increased analytical capabilities of Congress should be used primarily to analyze information produced by research and statistical agencies, such as the Economic Research Service of USDA and the land-grant universities. (Hamilton, Hearings, p. 154.)
3. Congress should develop closer liaison with the executive agencies and the land-grant universities, requesting them to devote more of their analytical capabilities to the analysis of information for Congress. (FAC report, Hearings, p. 7.)

The thrust of these suggestions and, the consensus of discussion with OTA'S Food Advisory **Committee and witnesses was** that increased analytical capability **need not** imply additional staff.

Congress has increased its staff substantially in recent years. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 primarily authorized an expansion in the Congressional Research Service and the General Accounting Office. House Resolution 998—the Boiling committee reform amendments, approved in 1974—realigned House committee responsibilities and authorized some additional committee staff. The Congressional Budget and Impoundment Act-Public Law 93-344, approved in 1974-also authorized and required additional staff.

Even though congressional staffs, including those of the agencies serving Congress—the General Accounting Office, Congressional Research Service, Office of Technology Assessment, and the Congressional Budget Office-have increased over 60 percent in the past 4 years, they are small in relation to the

workload of Congress. Congressional staffs also are very small in any specific area in relation to the size of similar staffs in executive agencies or universities.

In the area of food, agriculture, and nutrition, members and staff of the 93rd Congress dealt with 330 bills and resolutions in the Senate and with 1,501 similar items in the House of Representatives. Although the second session of the 94th Congress may not end until the close of the calendar year 1976, by April 19, 1976, congressional staff had dealt with 325 Senate and 1,400 House bills and resolutions in the area of food, agriculture, and nutrition.

Although all bills and resolutions which deal primarily with agriculture and nutrition are referred to the agriculture committees of the Senate and the House, 17 different committees in the Senate and 20 different committees in the House considered bills or resolutions dealing with food, agriculture, and nutrition in the 93rd and 94th Congresses. The number of items referred to each committee is shown in table 3.

The Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs and the Joint Economic Committee also spend considerable time and effort on problems in food, agriculture, and nutrition but do not have any bills or resolutions referred to them for action, since they do not have legislative responsibilities. Also, different procedures for introducing items in the House and Senate affect the numbers recorded. In the House a member may reintroduce an item several times as cosponsors are added. In the Senate, cosponsors are added to the original bill or resolution rather than reintroducing the item with cosponsors. A further indication of the activities of Congress in the area of food, agriculture, and nutrition is the number of bills and resolutions on which hearings were held and related actions taken. These are shown in table 4.

It is of interest to note that only 26 of the 330 items introduced in the Senate and 34 of the 1,501 items introduced in the House in the 93rd Congress were enacted by the Congress and approved by the President.

SCREENING AND EVALUATION OF INFORMATION FOR CONGRESS

Although members of Congress or their staffs seldom have all the information they would like to have on a particular issue, Congress does not suffer from a lack of information. Rather, member and committee offices are almost overwhelmed by the volume of reports, news items, letters, and telephone calls coming into their offices each day.

The screening of this massive flow of information is an enormous job. Members of Congress and their staffs, who have had little experience in the fields of food, agriculture, and nutrition, have little basis for judging the quality of the information coming from the different sources. Many students of the problem believe that the critical need in this area is neither more information nor more staff but more analytical capability.

Members of Congress and congressional committees depend primarily on the Congressional Research Service to supplement their staffs in supplying analytical evaluated information. The Congressional Research Service, with its automatic data-processing facilities and other research resources, is the only agency which has as its primary goal, on a continuing basis, the organization of information specifically to meet the day-to-day requests of members and committees of Congress. It maintains a corps of analysts in most subject matter fields and stands ready to respond as promptly as their own staffs to requests by members of committees of Congress.

In recent years the increasing amounts of information and **analyses most commonly requested have been accumulated in computer data banks and are available on a moment's notice.**

Members of Congress, congressional committees, and subcommittees dealing with food, agriculture, and nutrition issues also call on the USDA Economic Research Service and to a lesser extent on other government agencies for analytical reports. Professors at the land-grant universities are another important source of evaluated information on food policy issues.

The Government Accounting Office, which in earlier years was primarily engaged in auditing the administration of Government programs, more recently has responded to congressional requests for analysis of current or emerging issues of concern to members of Congress.

Two congressional staff agencies that provide additional analytical capability for the Congress were very recently created. These are the Office of Technology Assessment and the Congressional Budget-Office.

The Office of Technology Assessment responds to requests from committee chairmen and ranking minority members for indepth studies and assessments that require more resources than are available in the Congressional Research Service.

The Congressional Budget Office, now in its second year, has developed a modest analytical staff that is fully occupied with issues closely related to the new budget responsibilities of Congress.

IMPROVING THE CAPACITY OF CONGRESS TO ANALYZE FOOD ISSUES

After surveying both the flows of information and the analytical capabilities of the congressional staffs and those of the research agencies serving Congress, Food Advisory Committee members and witnesses at the hearings concluded that the greatest congressional needs at this time are more analytical services and capabilities for dealing with the burgeoning information flow on the rapidly changing situation involving food, agriculture, and nutrition. '

¹ Hearings, pp. 12-14.

The Food Advisory Committee suggested strengthening the analytic capabilities of the major congressional committees dealing with food, agriculture, and nutrition. They also suggested that a group of several competent analysts capable of making its own studies should be available to the Congress. This group of analysts might be located in a single agency such as the Congressional Research Service, or it might be made up of analysts complementary to one another from several congressional committees and staff agencies.

As pointed out by one witness, congressional action to improve its own staff capability should not be limited to increasing the number of professional staff members. Attention should also be given to how to make professional staff resources more aware of and more responsive to the needs of Congress.

Improved communication and coordination of activities among the Congressional Research Service, Office of Technology Assessment, General Accounting Office, Congressional Budget Office, and the staffs of the agriculture and nutrition committees could eliminate unnecessary duplication of the various staffs on the important issues that confront the Congress.

Witnesses indicated that the increased analytical capabilities needed by Congress in the field of food, agriculture, and nutrition could be supplied to a considerable extent by increased reliance on the USDA Economic Research Service, other executive agencies with competent analytical staffs, and professors at the land-grant universities. Coordinated use of these resources could make more readily available to Congress a greater amount of expertise and analytical capability than is presently the case.

Of the several options open to Congress in dealing with this important issue, the first to be considered might well be to place a premium on the professional background of the committee and agency staffs as replacements are recruited to fill vacancies caused by retirements and resignations.

Another option would be for the appropriate congressional committee or committees to ask the professionally trained agriculturalists serving Congress either on its committees or in its agencies, to inventory their special capabilities and develop a program of specialization and communication to the end that their outstanding abilities are more fully utilized and Congress is better served.

A third means of increasing the analytical capabilities available to Congress involves more forward planning and increased liaison with the universities and executive agencies having research staffs. The staffs in the executive agencies and professors at the land-grant universities have their own programs of work that must be interrupted when they attempt to respond to emergency requests from Congress. With advance planning and modest financial assistance in some cases, analysts in research agencies and at land-grant universities have indicated a willingness to devote more of their resources to analyses of issues for Congress.

Table 3.—Bills and Resolutions Dealing with Food, Agriculture, and Nutrition Introduced in the 93rd and 94th Congresses*

Referred to Senate Committees	Number of bills and resolutions	
	93rd	94th*
Aeronautical and Space Sciences	1	2
Agriculture and Forestry	177	114
Appropriations	—	2
Armed Services	—	2
Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs	17	14
Budget	—	2
Commerce	16	25
District of Columbia	1	—
Foreign Relations	8	11
Finance	23	32
Government Operations	—	14
Interior and Insular Affairs	5	29
Judiciary	14	8
Labor and Public Welfare	55	55
Post Office and Civil Service	4	6
Public Works	1	3
Rules Committee	8	6
Total	330	325
Referred to House Committees		
Administration	5	2
Agriculture	565	560
Appropriations	7	21
Armed Services	1	—
Banking and Currency	116	19
District of Columbia	1	1
Education and Public Welfare	133	98
International Relations	25	89
Government Operations	1	7
Interior and Insular Affairs	9	53
Interstate and Foreign Commerce	373	216
Judiciary	23	32
Merchant Marine and Fisheries	12	3
Post Office and Civil Service	10	41
Public Works	1	6
Rules	20	19
Science and Technology	1	13
Small Business	—	9
Veterans	6	1
Ways and Means	192	210
Total,	1,501	1,400

● From the House Bill Status Office.

**As of April 19, 1976.

**Table 4.—Actions Taken on Food, Agriculture, and Nutrition Items
in the 93rd and 94th Congresses***

	Senate		House	
	93rd	94th**	93rd	94th**
Total referred to committees	330	325	1501	1400
Items with hearings.	78	7a	382	220
Items reported out ... ,	73	56	68	67
Items with hearings that did not become law	59	73	359	207
Items reported with no hearings	38	22	20	31
Items passed by each.	75	57	74	75
Items that became law without hearings	7	5	11	5
Items that became law	26	10	34	18

●From the House Bill Status Office.

** As of April 19, 1976.