

# Tensions Between Public Health and Corporate Profitability in Recreation Settings

## Research Summary

This is a summary of the 2013 research article "Adopting and implementing nutrition guidelines in recreational facilities: tensions between public health and corporate profitability" by Dana Lee Olstad, Kim Raine, and Linda McCargar

### STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

- The primary goal of food vendors was to earn profit. This aim influenced their use of the voluntary **Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth (ANGCY)** in Alberta public recreational facilities.
- Food industry managers who followed the ANGCY in recreational facilities were willing to accept small short-term financial risks. They did so because they believed profits would improve in the long run.
- Food industry managers experienced a number of challenges that discouraged them from following the ANGCY. Managers agreed that government incentives and/or a mandate to follow the ANGCY would be necessary to significantly increase healthy food options in Alberta recreational facilities.

### BACKGROUND

- Public recreational facilities can promote health by providing affordable places to participate in physical activity. Yet, many of these facilities also sell unhealthy food. The ANGCY are designed to improve food options in these settings. However, [past research](#) has found that they are rarely used.
- Public recreational facilities often partner with private vendors to offer food and beverage services. In exchange for space to operate, food vendors return a portion of their profits to facilities. Facilities often rely on these profits to maintain affordable recreational opportunities for their patrons.
- More research is needed to understand how recreational facilities can partner with food vendors to promote healthier food choices.

### STUDY PURPOSE

- To understand factors influencing food industry managers' use of the ANGCY in Alberta public recreational facilities.



### STUDY METHODS

- Researchers interviewed 7 food industry managers providing food services in recreational facilities.
- 4 managers were using the ANGCY and 3 managers were not.
- Researchers asked managers about the benefits and risks of using the ANGCY in their food service operations (e.g. vending machines, concessions).

- **Managers who followed the ANGCY believed that offering healthier food would give them a competitive edge.** These managers were willing to take small short-term financial risks, because they expected that customer demand for healthy food would grow over time.
- **Managers who did not follow the ANGCY were afraid that increasing healthy food offerings would hurt profit.** For this reason, they did not see a clear benefit to using the ANGCY.

*“At the end of the day, I’ve got to make some money”*



- **Managers agreed that government incentives and/or that mandated policy was needed to significantly increase their use of the ANGCY.** They also felt that mandated policy would level the playing field upon which food vendors compete.



### Challenges to following the ANGCY

Food industry managers felt it was difficult to follow the ANGCY because:

#### Few ANGCY compliant foods were available

- Some managers found it difficult to find foods in the marketplace that fit within the ANGCY healthiest “choose most” group.

#### Healthy food options hurt sales

- Some managers tried introducing healthier food options. They found these items did not meet customer expectations for taste or price. As a result, these items did not sell.

#### Formal training and support was not given

- Some managers found the ANGCY difficult to understand. The government did not provide training on how to use the ANGCY. Some managers found their experience using the ANGCY in schools helped them to use the guidelines in recreational facilities.

#### Competitors sold unhealthy food

- Managers feared that if they followed the ANGCY, their customers would purchase unhealthy food options elsewhere.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recreational facilities and food vendors can work together to improve healthy food options. For this to occur, food industry managers must believe that the voluntary use of the ANGCY will give them a competitive edge and help grow profits over time.
- Some food industry managers felt that following the ANGCY would put them at a disadvantage and harm profits. Government incentives may encourage more food vendors to follow the ANGCY.
- Widespread voluntary use of the ANGCY by food vendors is not likely to occur due to a lack of government support and competition from vendors who sell unhealthy food. To significantly improve food options in Alberta recreational facilities, government-mandated policy may be required.

### REFERENCE

Olstad, D. L., Raine, K. D., & McCargar, L. J. (2013). Adopting and implementing nutrition guidelines in recreational facilities: tensions between public health and corporate profitability. *Public Health Nutrition*, 16(05), 815-823.

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