October 23, 2026

The Honorable Russell Vought
Director of the Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20503

Dear Director Vought:

As science, medical, and nutrition experts from across the country who study food, nutrition, and health, we, speaking in our personal capacities, urge you to release the proposed federal definition of ultra-processed food (UPF) as soon as possible.

It is critical that special interests not hold up this process. Most Americans are aware of UPFs and wish to avoid them, but deeper familiarity with UPF remains limited, signaling a need for guidance.[1] The first step is releasing the proposed definition.

Poor nutrition is a leading risk factor for death and disability in the United States.[2] Nearly one in two U.S. adults has some form of cardiovascular disease,[3] one in two has diabetes or prediabetes,[4] and seven in 10 have overweight or obesity.[5] Among teens, one in three has prediabetes,[4] and two in five have overweight or obesity.[6] Beyond the health consequences, poor nutrition causes an estimated $2 trillion in annual economic losses due to preventable health care spending and reduced productivity.[7]

UPF plays a role in this national nutrition crisis. UPF represents nearly 60 percent of calories consumed by U.S. adults[8] and 70 percent of calories consumed by U.S. children.[9] More than 80 longitudinal cohort studies from around the world, and three randomized controlled trials, document health harms associated with UPF. Clear communication to consumers would help Americans identify UPF so they can make informed choices for themselves and their families.

We are encouraged that the Department of Health and Human Services and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have submitted to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) a white paper outlining a proposed definition of UPF, following the 2025 joint request for information from FDA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.[10] A national operational definition of UPF is important to guide efficient science-based consumer education and public policy. In the absence of a federal standard, U.S. states have been taking inconsistent action: in 2025 alone, more than 35 states introduced or enacted

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[1] American Heart Association and Harris Poll. Ultraprocessed foods: Public opinion research. https://iprsoftwaremedia.com/67/files/20269/567725f50ed2f6259814828cb4035e91/AHA%20Ultraprocessed%20Foods%20Research%20Key%20Findings%20-%20Oct.%202026.pdf
[2] *JAMA.* 2018;319(14):1444–1472. doi:10.1001/jama.2018.0158
[3] *Circulation.* 2026;153(9):e275–e906. https://doi.org/10.1161/CIR.0000000000001412
[4] CDC. 2026. National Diabetes Statistics Report. https://usdss.cdc.gov/diabetes/report.html
[5] CDC. 2026. Prevalence of Obesity. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/hestat111.htm
[6] *JAMA.* 2025;333(12):1082–1084. doi:10.1001/jama.2024.27676
[7] The Rockefeller Foundation. 2021. True Cost of Food: Measuring What Matters to Transform the U.S. Food System. https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/reports/true-cost-of-food-measuring-what-matters-to-transform-the-u-s-food-system/ (cost estimate adjusted upward from 2021 number based on health care cost increases)
[8] *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2025;125(7):875–887.e7. doi:10.1016/j.jand.2024.11.014
[9] *JAMA.* 2021;326(6):519–530. doi:10.1001/jama.2021.10238
[10] Ultra-Processed Foods; Request for Information, Docket No. FDA-2025-N-1793 (July 2025). https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/07/25/2025-14089/ultra-processed-foods-request-for-information

UPF-focused legislation using different UPF definitions,[11,12] many of which depart substantially from the science. A national operational definition could establish a common science-based communications and regulatory framework for federal and state agencies, enabling consistent implementation across policies and settings. It would also reduce compliance costs for businesses by establishing a national definition in place of multiple, inconsistent state definitions, giving them a predictable standard to follow across jurisdictions.

Releasing the proposed definition would not, on its own, impose new requirements on food producers or retailers, restrict the foods Americans can buy, or raise food prices. It would, however, give families, businesses, and other stakeholders a common standard to inform their decisions.

One example of a UPF definition was suggested in the recent report "Ultra-processed Foods in the U.S.: Recommended Definitions and Policies," the product of an expert panel of nutrition and food scientists, lawyers, and representatives from health organizations convened by Healthy Eating Research in 2025–2026. The approach proposed by the panel operationalizes the Nova classification system by defining UPF as products that contain specific ingredient types that are markers for ultra-processing, while exempting UPFs considered components of a healthy diet, based on the FDA "healthy" claim criteria.

The federal government has an opportunity to establish a UPF definition that is scientifically grounded, operationally feasible, and transparent. We respectfully urge OMB to release the proposed federal definition of UPF for public assessment without further delay.

Sincerely,

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[11] *JAMA*. 2026;335(10):843–844. doi:10.1001/jama.2026.0366.
[12] *Am J Public Health.* 2026;116(7):1025–1029. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2026.308464

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