

Why Fast Food Could Be MAHA's Next Target

Big food companies are in RFK Jr.'s crosshairs. Will President Trump's favorite cuisine soon find itself in the same spot?

Back in September, Wisconsin Republican Senator Ron Johnson convened a discussion on health and nutrition, in what could be considered the kickoff meeting of the “Make America Healthy Again” movement. It was just a couple of weeks after Robert F. Kennedy Jr. had penned an op-ed under that headline for the *Wall Street Journal*, [proposing an agenda for an incoming Trump administration](#). At the event, doctors, activists and social media influencers testified about what was making Americans sick and what could heal them.

Kennedy—months before he would be named President Donald Trump's nominee to lead the Department of Health and Human Services—was anointing himself the leader of a loose coalition that ranged from wellness gurus and regenerative agriculture advocates to critics of genetically modified foods and vaccines. The first to speak after Johnson, Kennedy launched into his diagnosis: Americans are “[sicker](#), [more depressed](#), [fatter](#), [more infertile](#) at an increasing rate, while crippling our national security, bankrupting our national budget with health-care costs.”

He pointed the finger first at ultraprocessed foods, noting they're found in school lunches and often paid for with food stamps. [In Trump's Nov. 6 victory speech](#), he indicated that Kennedy would have

a free hand to reshape the country's public-health system. So far, most of Kennedy and MAHA's ire has been directed at the packaged food companies. Why not also America's most iconic unhealthy institution: fast food?

To understand why fast-food executives shouldn't breathe a sigh of relief just yet, begin with [Vani Hari](#), better known as the Food Babe, who took the floor about three hours into that September roundtable. Hari is a longtime online food activist, known for going after major food companies for their questionable ingredient choices. In 2014, after she launched a campaign against Subway for serving bread made with azodicarbonamide—dubbed the “yoga mat chemical” because it's found in those, too—the chain said it was already in the process of removing it. A couple of years later, it had [also been removed](#) from breads at McDonald's, Chick-fil-A, Wendy's, White Castle and Jack in the Box. The yoga mat chemical became just one of many ingredient notches in Hari's belt, which she says also include [Starbucks removing caramel coloring](#) from its pumpkin spice latte and [Chipotle publishing its full ingredients list](#).

At the roundtable, Hari outlined a basic problem of the American industrial food system: “Our government is letting US food companies get away with serving American citizens harmful ingredients that are banned or heavily regulated in other countries,” she said, emphasizing that American food companies “continue selling us the most toxic version here.” Then, rather than using her latest campaign—against the artificial dyes in Froot Loops—as Exhibit A, she offered another example: McDonald's french fries, which have 11 ingredients in the US compared with three in the UK. One of those ingredients is

dimethylpolysiloxane, or DMPS, which she says is “preserved with formaldehyde” and used as a foaming agent so restaurants don’t have to change the oil as frequently.

The National Restaurant Association defends the use of DMPS, telling [Bloomberg Businessweek](#) that the Food and Drug Administration-approved ingredient is used “to prevent cooking oil from splattering, which helps keep crew members safe in the kitchen.” McDonald’s USA stands by its menu, ingredients and relationships with farmers. “McDonald’s top priority is food quality and safety,” the company said in a statement to [Businessweek](#). “Claims to the contrary are not rooted in fact.” It noted that “in 2018 for example, we removed artificial preservatives, flavors and added colors from artificial sources from all of our classic burgers (except for the pickles).”

Now that the big packaged-food companies have found themselves in MAHA’s crosshairs—Smucker was even [asked about it](#) in an earnings call—fast-food companies ought to consider themselves on notice. MAHA adherents have plenty of other ideas about how to clean up fast-food menus. John Roulac, a regenerative farming evangelist, sees french fries as an opportunity to swap out the MAHA-hated vegetable oils, also known as seed oils, currently used to fry up the potatoes, for their preferred alternative, beef tallow. Or, as Kennedy put it in an October tweet, [Make Frying Oil Tallow Again](#). (While many health experts agree with much of [the MAHA food platform](#), the anti-seed-oils position, that the oils are inflammatory, is [widely disputed](#).) Getting ahead of it, Indianapolis-based chain Steak ’n Shake has already heeded the tallow call, saying last month it would switch its frying oil.

Whether the food regulatory systems outside of HHS bend to MAHA's will is very much an open question. The Republican Party [has not been known](#) to be anti-Big Ag or pro-healthy eating. The last Trump administration rolled back some of Michelle Obama's school lunch requirements and even let Tyson Foods write an executive order to [keep plants open](#) during Covid-19 outbreaks. Brooke Rollins, the nominee to lead the Department of Agriculture, committed in her Senate confirmation hearing to reducing ultraprocessed foods in school meals, seen as a nod to Kennedy's preferences. But the [new chief of staff](#) at the department also happens to be the former president and chief executive officer of the [National Oilseed Processors Association](#) and the [Edible Oil Producers Association](#). Though Kennedy will likely end up with control of one major department, significant influence over agricultural policy could be out of reach.

And so far, Kennedy—who not long ago described the greasy fare as ranging from “[really, like, bad](#)” to “kind of inedible” and even “poison”—seems, superficially at least, to be hewing to the preferences of his Big Mac-loving, soon-to-be boss. In November, Donald Trump Jr. posted a photo of RFK Jr., along with President Trump, [Elon Musk](#), Trump Jr. and House Speaker Mike Johnson awkwardly getting ready to eat some McDonald's, with the caption “Make America Healthy Again starts TOMORROW.” At [his confirmation hearing in January](#), Kennedy assured senators, “If you like a McDonald's cheeseburger or Diet Coke—which my boss loves—you should be able to get them.”

Still, Mark Hyman, a well-known physician, healthy food advocate and longtime Kennedy ally, told me that regulating fast food in some way is “inevitable.” The industry’s questionable ingredients—often the same dyes and preservatives that often show up in packaged food—will make it impossible for MAHA to ignore.

But how soon that happens could largely depend on whether consumers demand it. Part of what catapulted the movement into the spotlight, and helped swing some former Democrats to vote Republican, is that consumer choices became political ones. Experts may or may not think seed oils are unhealthy, but if consumers do, that’s a problem for the restaurants that use them. Politics aside, few consumers want to hear about weird foaming agents in their fries that aren’t being used in the same food in other countries. MAHA’s power is not just in its potential to change laws, it’s also in its potential to share information and sway opinion.

Whether MAHA can turn its electoral victory into actual policy remains to be seen. It’s hard to predict anything with real certainty, but I’d wager that, at some point, the fast-food industry, which has been preoccupied with inflation and hemorrhaging low-income customers, is going to get the Froot Loops treatment. They better hope that simply making their products as they do in the UK—a low bar, to be sure—is all that’s asked of them.