



The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station

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PRESS RELEASE

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USDA NIFA Workshop Report on Toxic Elements in Food is Released

New Haven, CT - There is great interest in reducing exposure to toxic metals in food, particularly for women who are pregnant and/or lactating, infants, and young children up to the age of five. Recent Congressional reports ([2021-02-04 ECP Baby Food Staff Report.pdf \(house.gov\)](#) ; [ECP Second Baby Food Report 9.29.21 FINAL.pdf \(house.gov\)](#)) highlighted the significance and severity of toxic metals presence in many food commodities. The USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) awarded funding to Dr. Jason C. White, Director of the CAES, and Dr. Om Parkash Dhankher, Professor, Stockbridge School of Agriculture, University of Massachusetts Amherst, to conduct a workshop entitled “USDA NIFA Workshop on Toxic Elements in Food: Identification of Critical Knowledge Gaps to Ensure a Safe Food Supply.” The workshop was held virtually on April 4-5, 2022 and included 35 subject matter experts from around the country, as well as 40 participants from the USDA NIFA, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the food industry. The report from this workshop has now been authorized for release by USDA NIFA https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/CAES/DOCUMENTS/Publications/Press_Releases/2022/October-20/NIFA-C2Z-Workshop-Full-Report_Toxic-Elements-in-Food.pdf

The workshop report identifies critical research, education, extension needs and knowledge gaps, and advances our understanding of key issues and opportunities, including mitigation of toxic element contamination of the food supply to ensure food safety. The workshop and report are part of the ‘Closer to Zero’ initiative of the USDA,

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FDA, and other federal agencies ([Metals and Your Food | FDA](#)). The report also provides important recommendations to USDA across several thematic areas, including:

1. Soil chemistry, soil amendments, and microbiome interactions with toxic elements
2. Plant uptake and accumulation of toxic elements
3. Multidisciplinary concerns such as food processing, detection/sensors, nutritional status-metal interference/ traditional knowledge

The recommendations from the workshop’s panel of experts includes establishing a new transdisciplinary “Center-like” funding mechanism within USDA NIFA similar to other federal agencies such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) or the National Science Foundation (NSF). According to Dr. Jason C. White and Prof. Om Parkash Dhankher, “this level of resource commitment from USDA will enable sufficient transdisciplinary research and understanding to avoid and mitigate toxic metal contamination of food.” The report also recommends increased funding for extension and outreach services to increase public awareness over the risk of metal exposure in food, exploration of modern genetic approaches to develop new varieties with reduced metal distribution to edible plant tissues, as well as the strengthening of regulatory systems at the national and international level that are predicated on common global science-based standards.

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