VII.   SUMMARY OF INITIATIVE ALTERNATIVES

This section provides a discussion of alternatives to conducting this initiative.

SNPIIS Piggy-back Alternative *(Summary of Costs provided in Appendix B)*

Before discussing this alternative, we want to stress that the intent of the proposed initiative is not only to use a new data collection methodology to capture existing data but also to develop an interactive communication tool in the form of the proposed website. However, given the current effort to develop the School Nutrition Programs Integrated Information System (SNPIIS), we recognize that parts of the proposed initiative may result in duplication of effort and increased (and unnecessary) burden to the States. Although not definite, it is possible that SNPIIS will eventually collect School Food Authority data; this presents a unique opportunity to tailor *this* initiative to capture those data elements directly from SNPIIS. In effect, this would eliminate the need to develop computer assisted data entry programs and conduct annual data collections under this initiative.

However, collecting the data is only part of the proposed initiative. The need still exists to design a research-friendly database, tables, query tools, and articles that will be useful to researchers, States, and district personnel. As such, we suggest in this alternative to eliminate some of the proposed activities yet retain the basic elements of identifying and working with a steering committee, designing a research-friendly website, developing table and article formats, and pursuing ad hoc inquiries with School Food Authorities if possible. We also retain activities related to developing automatic data uploads, not only from SNPIIS, but also from other databases, since not all of the data elements are expected to be available from SNPIIS. Finally, if SNPIIS data becomes available for all States, this initiative alternative would not need to be limited to nine states. Similarly, OMB clearance would no longer be necessary, as no new data collections would be required.

While not addressed in this alternative, it is also worth considering that many of the proposed tasks that attempt to lay the groundwork for the kind of data that would be collected in this initiative could help inform the eventual collection of SFA data through SNPIIS. For example, developing contact lists at the State level, conducting structured interviews with States to assess the format, and type of data available, reviewing archived data, identifying existing databases from which data elements can be extracted, are all critical steps in building a database that will be useful to the relevant stakeholders. For the purposes of costing this initiative alternative, however, we assume that SNPIIS will collect many of the SFA data elements sought in this initiative. Thus, we eliminated certain tasks and reduced others with this assumption in mind.

A summary of the costs associated with this initiative alternative is presented in Appendix B, along with a discussion of the hours associated with the initiative tasks.

Other Alternatives *(Not Costed)*

As previously mentioned, many of the proposed tasks are necessary regardless of how the data are ultimately collected; however, the use of a web-based data collection and display system is not necessary. An alternative to developing the website is to collect the data using a mail survey, possibly with a telephone follow-up to clarify or collect missing data. The final datafile can then be made available through USDA. Since costing out a mail survey of this magnitude would require that many of the proposed tasks be redefined or deleted, and new tasks added, we will not attempt to cost this initiative in this report.

Initial tasks of defining the key elements of the database, the schedule of data collection, and the selection of the initial nine states will be fairly common across any means of collecting the data. Similarly, there will need to be an analysis of which data elements are currently available from existing database sources. While this initiative proposes to design a system that ostensibly should be able to be used indefinitely, a mail survey would require the production and receipt of hard copy forms each time a survey is implemented.

In comparing a web-based data collection system with a mail survey, one needs to consider whether the use of a web-based data collection system has advantages that a mail survey may not have, and vice versa. From USDA's perspective, the advantages of using a web-based data collection system to collect the proposed data are:

- Respondent burden is potentially reduced, especially if data can be automatically uploaded from the States (positive from OMB's perspective, as well as the participating States');

- Skip logic and range checks can be programmed into the website forms, ensuring cleaner data and a shorter "data cleaning" period;

- There are no return postage costs (unless States must send their data via hard copy);

- Labor to handle incoming hardcopy forms is substantially reduced, if not eliminated;

- Storage and eventual disposal of hardcopy forms is eliminated;

- Data entry (typically performed twice for quality control) is eliminated.

- Data can be collected, analyzed, and disseminated in a timely manner.

- Once the system is set up, data collection requests can be made with much less effort and cost than with a traditional mail survey design;

- Prompting, reminders, and questions during the data collection process can be handled via email; and

- The Web site itself can function as an interactive tool between USDA and the States, depending on the kinds of queries, reports, and articles that are posted.

From the States' perspective, if data collection is implemented as a standard mail survey, it is not clear whether the burden to the States will be higher than the proposed initiative or lower. However, several advantages to using a website still exist:

- States can automatically upload required data elements to the central database if these data elements are in a file format compatible with USDA's requirements; this reduces States' response burden;

- Skip logic and range checks can be programmed into the forms States use to key in their data, allowing States to make corrections or edits on-line;

- States will be given access to a user-friendly datafile able to be queried and displayed in a variety of formats.

It is also worth mentioning two potential disadvantages (or issues) that may arise with web-based data collection. Neither of these are insurmountable and neither may occur; however, we mention them here nonetheless.

- USDA may have to spend time working with the States to educate them on "using the web" as a data collection tool. That is, there may be a higher learning curve for respondents than one would expect to observe with a standard mail survey; and

- It is possible that the target "respondent" may pass the data entry responsibility to another individual, who may or may not be familiar with the data. Typically, in a mail survey, one can request that the person who is supposed to provide the data provide a signature authorizing that the data are correct to the best of his or her knowledge. This is not possible with a web-based data collection, as the target respondent will be given a username and password, both of which can easily be handed off to someone else.

Additional "alternatives" to this initiative exist; however, it is not clear how feasible some of these are. For example, one alternative might be to have USDA *require* that all states report SFA level data to receive funding for the NSLP/SBP programs. The proposed initiative could then be redesigned to build a web application to collect data from States or SFAs *in a format specified by USDA*. Thus, the responsibility passes to States or SFAs to provide the data elements in the specified format. The advantage to this approach is that the data will be uniform, and USDA should also be able to obtain data from a census of States, rather than a sample of States. Another alternative might be to purposively select a sample of nine states that have similar software and systems. If

one system is used or is compatible with all nine of these states, costs could be kept lower as the automatic uploading and web-based applications could be less "general" and more specific. A disadvantage to this is that it may or may not accommodate additional states' systems if the data collection system is expanded.