RFK Jr.’s “Make America Healthy Again” Movement Has Picked Up Steam in Statehouses. Here’s What To Expect in 2026.

MAHA ideas have made their deepest inroads at the state level, with strong support from Republicans—and in some places, from Democrats.

January 16, 2026 By Alan Greenblatt and KFF Health News

When one of Adam Burkhammer’s foster children struggled with hyperactivity, the West Virginia legislator and his wife decided to alter their diet and remove any foods that contained synthetic dyes.

“We saw a turnaround in his behavior, and our other children,” said Burkhammer, who has adopted or fostered 10 kids with his wife. “There are real impacts on real kids.”

The Republican turned his experience into legislation, sponsoring a bill to ban seven dyes from food sold in the state. It became law in March, making West Virginia the first state to institute such a ban from all food products.

The bill was among a slew of state efforts to regulate synthetic dyes. In 2025, roughly 75 bills aimed at food dyes were introduced in 37 states, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Chemical dyes and nutrition are just part of the broader “Make America Healthy Again” agenda. Promoted by Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., MAHA ideas have made their deepest inroads at the state level, with strong support from Republicans — and in some places, from Democrats. The $50 billion Rural Health Transformation Program — created last year as part of the GOP’s One Big Beautiful Bill Act to expand health care access in rural areas — offers incentives to states that implement MAHA policies.

Federal and state officials are seeking a broad swath of health policy changes, including rolling back routine vaccinations and expanding the use of drugs such as ivermectin for treatments beyond their approved use. State lawmakers have introduced dozens of bills targeting vaccines, fluoridated water, and PFAS, a group of compounds known as “forever chemicals” that have been

linked to cancer and other health problems.

In addition to West Virginia, six other states have targeted food dyes with new laws or executive orders, requiring warning labels on food with certain dyes or banning the sale of such products in schools. California has had a law regulating food dyes since 2023.

Most synthetic dyes used to color food have been around for decades. Some clinical studies have found a link between their use and hyperactivity in children. And in early 2025, in the last days of President Joe Biden's term, the Food and Drug Administration outlawed the use of a dye known as Red No. 3.

Major food companies including Nestle, Hershey, and PepsiCo have gotten on board, pledging to eliminate at least some color additives from food products over the next year or two.

"We anticipate that the momentum we saw in 2025 will continue into 2026, with a particular focus on ingredient safety and transparency," said John Hewitt, the senior vice president of state affairs for the Consumer Brands Association, a trade group for food manufacturers.

This past summer, the group called on its members to voluntarily eliminate federally certified artificial dyes from their products by the end of 2027.

"The state laws are really what's motivating companies to get rid of dyes," said Jensen Jose, regulatory counsel for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nonprofit health advocacy group.

Andy Baker-White, the senior director of state health policy for the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, said the bipartisan support for bills targeting food dyes and ultraprocessed food struck him as unusual. Several red states have proposed legislation modeled on California's 2023 law, which bans four food additives.

"It's not very often you see states like California and West Virginia at the forefront of an issue together," Baker-White said.

Although Democrats have joined Republicans in some of these efforts, Kennedy continues to drive the agenda. He appeared with Texas officials when the state enacted a package of food-related laws, including one that bars individuals who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — SNAP, or food stamps — from using their benefits to buy candy or sugary drinks. In December, the U.S. Department of Agriculture approved similar waivers sought by six states. Eighteen states will block SNAP purchases of those items in 2026.

There are bound to be more. The Rural Health Transformation Program also offers incentives to states that implemented restrictions on SNAP.

"There are real and concrete effects where the rural health money gives points for changes in SNAP eligibility or the SNAP definitions," Baker-White said.

In October, California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a bill that sets a legal definition for ultraprocessed foods and will phase them out of schools. It's a move that may be copied in other states in 2026, while also providing fodder for legal battles. In December, San Francisco City Attorney David Chiu sued major food companies, accusing them of selling "harmful and addictive" products. The lawsuit names specific brands — including cereals, pizzas, sodas, and potato chips — linking them to serious health problems.

Kennedy has also blamed ultraprocessed foods for chronic diseases. But even proponents of the efforts to tackle nutrition concerns don't agree on which foods to target. MAHA adherents on the right haven't focused on sugar and sodium as much as policymakers on the left. The parties have also butted heads over some Republicans' championing of raw milk, which can spread harmful germs, and the consumption of saturated fat, which contributes to heart disease.

Policymakers expect other flash points. Moves by the FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that are making vaccine access more difficult have led blue states to find ways to set their own standards apart from federal recommendations, with 15 Democratic governors announcing a new public health alliance in October. Meanwhile, more red states may eliminate vaccine mandates for employees; Idaho made them illegal. And Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is pushing to eliminate school vaccine mandates.

Even as Kennedy advocates eliminating artificial dyes, the Environmental Protection Agency has loosened restrictions on chemicals and pesticides, leading MAHA activists to circulate an online petition calling on President Donald Trump to fire EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin.

Congress has yet to act on most MAHA proposals. But state lawmakers are poised to tackle many of them.

"If we're honest, the American people have lost faith in some of our federal institutions, whether FDA or CDC," said Burkhammer, the West Virginia lawmaker. "We're going to step up as states and do the right thing."

This story was published by KFF Health News on January 13, 2026. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/rfk-jrs-make-america-healthy-movement-picked-steam-statehouses-expect-2026