



President's Perspective

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January 25, 2011

A reason not to eat peas... PALEAZE!

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently issued proposed changes to the meal and nutrition standards for the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. After reviewing this proposal, I wonder if USDA bureaucrats fully grasp the potential consequences of their actions.

The bureaucrats probably don't fully appreciate that a potato is loaded with more potassium than a medium size banana and a serving of green peas delivers the same amount of fiber as broccoli.

Under the proposed rule, school foodservice operators would not be permitted to serve students more than one cup of white potatoes, peas, corn and lima beans – total – per week. And, no "starchy vegetables" could be served for breakfast. If enacted, this proposed change will profoundly impact the ability of school foodservice operators to provide students with these nutrient-dense vegetables.

So, what's the rationale behind this proposal? USDA is attempting to align the school meal program with the recommendations of the National Academies' Institute of Medicine (IOM), which were contained in its 2009 report, *School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children*.

Specifically, IOM reports that vegetable consumption by children is very low and that 29 percent of total vegetable intake among children comes from potatoes. So, the reasoning goes, because overall vegetable consumption is low we should place an arbitrary limit on an entire category of nutrient-dense vegetables in an effort to encourage greater consumption of other, less starchy ones.

IOM admits that because potatoes and corn are popular choices among children, the proposed limits may lead to decreased student acceptance of meals served. This, in turn, could lead to "the consumption of poorer quality diets by students, either by eating less of the food that is offered or by switching from school meals to à la carte meals, food from vending machines or school stores, off-campus meals or food from home," according to IOM.

IOM appears to have pinned its hopes for improving childhood nutrition on winning students' acceptance of less starchy vegetables, "anticipating that parents and

students will ultimately appreciate the value of nutritionally improved school meals and that, with repeated exposures and high-quality food preparation, students will learn to value the vegetable items offered." Really?!

The IOM report identifies fiber and potassium as nutrients that fall below the "adequate intake" levels for elementary, middle and high school aged children. As a matter of fact, the committee noted that when students select no vegetables at all for lunch, the meal's content of fiber and potassium is well under 80 percent of the nutrient target for all grades.

It's important to note that potatoes offer more potassium than a banana and 45 percent of the recommended daily intake of vitamin C while a serving of green peas delivers the same amount of fiber as broccoli. So here's a thought: schools could continue to serve nutritionally valuable potatoes, corn and peas, which we know students actually like to eat.

A December 2010 survey of school foodservice professionals conducted by FoodMinds indicates the majority of district level foodservice directors oppose the recommendation to limit starchy vegetables within the school lunch program, believing that potato offerings do not limit access to or consumption of other vegetables.

Furthermore, the limit on starchy vegetables will make it virtually impossible for school foodservice operators to offer nutritious meals *that kids will eat* without incurring overly burdensome additional expense. The recently-signed childhood nutrition law provides for a six-cent increase in the reimbursement rate per meal for schools that meet the new, stricter nutrition standards. However, it is estimated that the limit on starchy vegetables alone will come at a cost of about seven cents per meal. Only in Washington, D.C., does that make fiscal sense!

For many of AFFI's members, school foodservice constitutes a significant percentage of sales, and a limit on these products will certainly impact their bottom line.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service will be accepting written comments on the proposed school meals rule through April 13, 2011. AFFI will weigh in and will be providing its members with the tools and arguments to submit their own comments as well. As we've stressed before, numbers matter when it comes to public policy development.

In the meantime, if you have any questions about the proposed rule or AFFI's plan of action, please contact AFFI Director of Public and Industry Affairs Elise Cortina at ecortina@affi.com or (703) 821-0770.

As a parent, I also wonder how difficult it will be to get our kids to eat their peas at home if they're "not allowed" to eat them at school. Thanks a lot USDA!