

## Frequently Asked Questions – Potatoes and the USDA Proposed School Menu Limitations

### **Q. Why is there a push to limit vegetables like potatoes and corn in school meals?**

A. There is no scientific rationale for the proposed limits on the vegetables, corn, potatoes, lima beans and peas.

The Institute of Medicine report, “School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children” on which the USDA proposed rules are based, does not provide any specific rationale for severely curtailing starchy vegetables. In fact the IOM report acknowledges the popularity of vegetables, especially potatoes noting, “Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 1999–2002 (USDA/FNS, 2008c) indicate that vegetable consumption by children is very low, with the exception of potato consumption.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, it assumes only through “anecdotal reports from food service supervisors and newspaper articles that it is likely for... parents and students [to] 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.”<sup>1</sup> There is nothing in the IOM report to suggest that starchy vegetables contribute to nutritional or health-related issues.

### **Q. I keep hearing conflicting reports about the nutritional value of potatoes. Are they unhealthy for my children?**

A. Potatoes are a fat-free, sodium-free nutritional powerhouse that is an excellent and/or good sources of eight different vitamins and minerals for children, including two of the four most important nutrients deficient in kids’ diets—potassium and fiber.<sup>2</sup> In fact, potatoes rank highest for potassium content among the top 20 most frequently consumed raw vegetables and fruits (over 75% more than bananas),<sup>3</sup> and one medium baked potato contributes only 110 calories to the diet and has nearly as much fiber as a serving of broccoli,<sup>4</sup> providing 13% of children’s daily needs.

### **Q. How are French fried potatoes cooked and served in schools?**

A. The majority of schools today (89%) do not have fryers in their kitchens.<sup>5</sup> The “French fries” served at most schools are actually oven-baked and come in at approximately 110 calories per ½ cup serving. Cooking and preparation techniques may slightly impact its nutritional value – but the end product remains a healthy, nutrient-packed food, especially compared to other vegetables. For example:

- Oven baked French fries have almost three times the potassium and a similar amount of fiber as a serving of broccoli.<sup>6</sup>
- Oven baked French fries have 50% more vitamin C, more potassium and a similar amount of fiber as a serving of spinach.<sup>6</sup>

**Q. Aren't the 'oven-baked' fries served in schools actually fried first by the processor?**

A. Some oven-baked fries are par-fried, a technique used to improve texture of the final product. Other oven-baked fries served in schools are originally baked by the processor. In either case, the vast majority of fries offered in schools today is baked and have less than 110 calories per ½ cup serving.

**Q. I heard that when kids eat potatoes they don't consume other types of vegetables. Is this true?**

A. Recent research supports the position that consumption of potatoes positively impacts the consumption of other types of vegetables. Research from the University of Washington shows when potatoes are served, a wider variety of vegetables are consumed.<sup>7</sup> Also important: children will actually eat potatoes, even if they do not eat other vegetables.<sup>6</sup> As the only vegetable consumed at breakfast, and the vegetable most often consumed at lunch, potatoes provide children with valuable nutrients throughout the day.

**Q. The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends increasing consumption of vegetables, even "starchy" vegetables, yet the USDA is calling for restrictions on vegetables served in schools. Isn't this contradictory given the leading role the USDA plays in developing these recommendations?**

A. Yes. Nine out of 10 Americans do not meet vegetable intake recommendations—and over 90% of kids, specifically, are currently falling short in meeting recommendations for daily vegetable servings<sup>8</sup>. Increasing vegetable consumption is encouraged by every major federal public health nutrition education program, from the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans<sup>9</sup> and the Healthier U.S. School Challenge<sup>10</sup> to the First Lady's *Let's Move!*<sup>11</sup> initiative. To accomplish this, it seems logical and prudent to encourage *more* vegetable choices – especially those that kids will eat – rather than fewer choices. Yet the USDA is proposing to restrict certain vegetables – such as white potatoes – a decision that may eliminate one of the only vegetables children are willing to eat. While not the intended outcome, this initiative may actually result in a reduction in overall vegetable consumption.

In addition, the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA)<sup>9</sup> recommend average intakes of five cups of "starchy" vegetables per week (in a 2,000 calorie diet), which is an increase of two cups/week compared to the 2005 Guidelines.<sup>12</sup> The proposed rule for school meals<sup>13</sup> is based on the 2005 version; however, this change in "starchy" vegetables recommendations is significant and dictates reconsideration of the "starchy" vegetable limitations.

There is no science-based distinction that can be drawn between starchy vegetables and other vegetables. The nutritional profile of some ‘starchy’ vegetables is almost the same as that of some fruits that are currently being encouraged, like bananas.

**Q. Do the proposed restrictions help local school food programs increase the variety of vegetables in school meals?**

A. No. Local school food authorities are constantly seeking to improve school meals, and need the flexibility to do that in the best way possible. Data from a recent national survey<sup>14</sup> indicate that local school food authorities do not support this restriction. A majority of food service professionals also said that replacing servings of potatoes with other more expensive vegetables will:

- Increase plate waste (64%);
- Increase costs (60%); and
- Decrease school lunch participation (65%).

Even more startling, according to the survey, only 5% of school food service directors believe the new rules will improve the quality of children’s overall health, with *40% predicting a decline in children’s health due to a decrease in intake of potassium and fiber.*

**Q. Won’t these proposed restrictions help local school districts improve the nutrition in school meals?**

A. No. Menu analysis demonstrates that the inclusion of four servings of potatoes a week in school lunch meets, and in some instances exceeds, the nutrition targets set forth in the IOM report on which the USDA proposed rules are based.

**Q. Does the proposed rule take into account the tight, and often shrinking, school food and nutrition budgets? Are these proposed changes financially realistic in the current environment?**

A. USDA estimates the proposed meal plan will increase school lunch cost \$6.8 billion over the course of five years; 34% (\$2.3 billion) of this cost increase can be attributed, in part, to limits on potatoes.<sup>13</sup> These costs will be incurred by the economically strapped local and state agencies that control school food service accounts. At a time when school districts are struggling financially, now is not the time to needlessly increase serving costs without a positive – or even known, or perhaps negative – nutritional benefit. Potatoes are a nutrient and economical powerhouse offering 13% of a child’s daily potassium needs for less than five cents per serving.<sup>2</sup> In addition, potatoes, along with carrots and sweet potatoes, offered the highest score per dollar on nine important nutrients – potassium, fiber, protein, vitamins A, C, E, calcium, iron and magnesium. They also were found to be the lowest cost source of potassium. Keeping potatoes on the menu will help ease the financial burden being placed on school budgets.

**Q. Will the proposed rule impact the cost of the School Breakfast program?**

A. Yes. According to a report by the Irving Independent School District, the food costs associated with meeting the newly proposed school breakfast guidelines would be between 36% and 67% higher than current costs, on average, depending on grade level and items served. And, in stark contrast to the annual fiscal gains generated from the current school breakfast program, the three newly proposed breakfast meal plans will result in annual fiscal losses of between 63% and 385%, once labor for preparing, serving and cleaning up after breakfast are factored into the analysis.

**Q. How do limits on vegetables, like potatoes, in the proposed rule impact school food costs?**

A. The financial impacts associated with limiting vegetables, like potatoes, in schools are significant. There would be about a 5% increase in costs associated with limiting starchy vegetables to 1 cup/week, as recommended in the proposed rule.<sup>15</sup> For example, this increase would result in increased meal costs of over half a million dollars to DC public Schools, who served 7.5 million lunches in 2009.

**Q. Is the industry doing anything to ensure healthy preparation of potatoes in schools?**

A. Yes. As an industry, we need to balance meeting consumer needs with growing a product that is healthy and contributes positively to children's health and nutrition. As a result, the potato industry has worked hard to reduce calorie counts and improve the healthful nature of a vegetable that people like to eat. We are continually innovating with healthier preparation techniques and developing a wide range of products, so schools can serve kid-pleasing, nutritious foods that contribute to a healthy student body.

**Q. It's clear that enactment of this rule will mean fewer potatoes purchased by schools. Is the true motivation behind industry's efforts to stop limitations on potatoes sold in schools purely monetary?**

A. The potato industry is committed to the health of our nation's children and support efforts to improve their nutrition through increased consumption of vegetables and fruits. The fact is potatoes are a nutritional powerhouse and provide two of the four most critical or needed nutrients for kids – potassium and fiber – in significant quantities. The proposed rule will decrease access to a healthful vegetable that kids like and eat, that provides important nutrition at levels unlike any other vegetable and that actually increases the variety of vegetables that kids eat.

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<sup>1</sup> IOM (Institute of Medicine). 2010. *School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>2</sup> USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, Release 23 (2010). Potatoes, baked, flesh and skin, without salt. Available at: [http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/cgi-bin/list\\_nut\\_edit.pl](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/cgi-bin/list_nut_edit.pl). Accessed on September 21, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> DHHS FDA 21 CFR Part 101, Docket No. 2001N-0548, Food Labeling; Guidelines for Voluntary Nutrition Labeling of Raw Fruits, Vegetables, and Fish; Correction

<sup>4</sup> USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, Release 23 (2010) . Broccoli, Raw. Available at: [http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/cgi-bin/list\\_nut\\_edit.pl](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/cgi-bin/list_nut_edit.pl). Accessed on September 21, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> MMS Education, Newton, PA. Survey of School Food Service Professionals, August-September 2011. Paid for by the National Potato Council.

<sup>6</sup> School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-III: Volume II: Student Participation and Dietary Intakes. Final Report. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., November 2007. <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/SNDAvol2.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Drewnowski A, Rehm C and Beals K. White potatoes, non-fried, do not displace other vegetables in meals consumed by American children and adolescents aged 4-18 years

Abstract presented on April 13, 2011 at the Experimental Biology Meeting in Washington, D.C.

<sup>8</sup> Krebs Smith SM, Guenther PM, Subar AF, Kirkpatrick SI, Dodd KW. Americans Do Not Meet Federal Dietary Recommendations. *J Nutr.* 2010; 140(10): 1832-8

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010*. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 2010.

<sup>10</sup> USDA Healthier US School Challenge. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/healthierus/vision.html>. Accessed on September 21, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Lets Move! Available at: <http://www.letsmove.gov/>. Accessed on September 21, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005*. 6th Edition, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 2005.

<sup>13</sup> USDA and FNS 76 FR 2494, Docket No. 2011-485, Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs

<sup>14</sup> MMS Education, Newton, PA. Survey of School Food Service Professionals, December 2010. Paid for by the National Potato Council.

<sup>15</sup> A Model Menu with Potatoes: Getting at the Root of Healthier School Menus (unpublished); National Potato Council; November 2010.