

AMY KLOBUCHAR  
MINNESOTA

COMMITTEES:  
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION,  
AND FORESTRY  
COMMERCE, SCIENCE,  
AND TRANSPORTATION  
JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE  
JUDICIARY

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 22, 2011

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Jamie L. Whitten Federal Building  
1400 Independence Avenue  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I am writing regarding proposed rules issued recently by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). I strongly support improvements to these programs as they provide a nutritional safety net for our children. However, I am concerned the proposed rules may have unintended consequences that have the potential to limit access to NSLP and SBP – undermining the overall goals of the programs.

For example, under the proposed rules, the crediting of tomato paste would be based on the volume served as opposed to “as if single-strength reconstituted basis” as outlined in the *Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs*. Tomato paste contributes dietary fiber, potassium—a nutrient of concern for children—as well as Vitamins A & C. It is delivered to kids in popular school menu items they enjoy eating and drives NSLP and SBP participation. By changing the crediting, many tomato-based sauces and salsa-type applications would no longer be factored into the weekly requirements for vegetables. I believe we must focus on increasing fruits and vegetables rather than decreasing specific foods that provide an important source of essential nutrients.

I am also concerned about the proposed rule requirement that all grains offered to students must be whole grain rich within two years of implementation. The discrepancy among agency recommendations as to what constitutes a serving of whole grains complicates the proposed rules and has school and manufacturers working toward an uncertain goal. A clear and final definition of a whole grain serving needs to be in place before this rule is implemented.

Additionally, the USDA should reconsider the quantity and the proposed timeline for sodium reduction in NSLP and SBP meals. I commend USDA’s firm commitment to reducing sodium significantly in school food products in the coming years. However, reducing current actual sodium consumption by 54 percent is virtually unattainable when serving a dairy based center-of-the-plate item – such as pizza – with a recommended serving of low fat milk. A great deal of research and development has been done to lower sodium and fat in cheese and dairy products.

These studies have shown that reductions -- as proposed in the new rules -- would be difficult to achieve without compromising the safety of the foods. As a result, the timeline included in the proposed USDA rule is likely not viable when addressing the technical challenges of reducing sodium and considering student acceptance of reduced sodium meals. The proposed rules must consider the timing of how new products are introduced to schools and the advanced purchasing process for school districts. It is imperative to take into account the change in taste preferences of school-aged children. A drastic reduction may lead to decreased NSLP and SBP participation—compromising the overall goals of the programs.

I commend USDA for working hard on proposed rules to improve the nutrition standards in our school meal programs. The quality of the meals our kids eat in school plays a major role in their health and well-being. Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Amy Klobuchar  
U.S. Senator