

# The Federal Child Nutrition Commodity Program

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Report and Policy Recommendations

The Impact of the Federal Child Nutrition Commodity Program  
on the Nutritional Quality of School Meals in California

## Executive Summary

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) and Samuels & Associates (S&A), with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Healthy Eating Research program, conducted a study to determine the impact of the federal child nutrition commodity program on the nutritional quality of school meals, particularly those served in California.

The research was undertaken because commodity foods are a substantial component of the school meal programs, which in turn are an important contributor to the environment in which nearly 30 percent of school-age children are identified as obese or overweight and are, therefore, at risk of severe (and costly) medical consequences. About 3 million California students participate daily in the National School Lunch Program and 1 million participate in the School Breakfast Program. The two meals together provide over half the students' recommended daily dietary allowances.

The November 2007 School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment Study-III (SNDA III) found that no more than 6 to 7 percent of the nation's schools serve lunches that meet all of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) School Meal Initiative (SMI) standards. SNDA III also found little or no improvement in school meals' nutritional quality since the previous examination. School meals fall far short of the nutritional benchmarks recommended by the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

The research included nutritional analyses of commodity foods *offered* by USDA compared to foods *ordered* by school districts, as well as stakeholder interviews, focus groups of school food service directors, and a one-day convening at which participants discussed and proposed policy recommendations to improve nutritional quality in commodities and school meals.

### **Key Findings**

USDA's Child Nutrition Commodity Program contributes over 180 food items, valued at about \$1 billion annually, to the nation's school meal programs. Commodities provide approximately 20 percent of the food served in school lunches. In the past 15 years, USDA has made continuous improvements to the nutritional quality of the commodity foods *offered*, changing both the composition of individual items and the selection of food items available. Nonetheless, in California more than 82 percent of the entitlement dollars spent on commodities *ordered* by school districts went to meat and cheese items, both relatively high in fats and saturated fats. By comparison, fruit, fruit juice, vegetables, and legumes amounted to only 13 percent.

Nationally, over 50 percent (55 percent in California) of commodity foods are sent to processors before they are delivered to school districts. Processing, which may add fat, sugar, and sodium to foods, is unregulated for nutritional quality. The SMI review is ill equipped to identify the deficiencies stemming from processing or, for that matter, other unhealthy food items and preparation methods.

In California, slightly more than 25 percent of school districts either do not participate in the commodity program or do not exhaust their full commodity entitlement. Budget cuts over the years have left both state and national commodity agencies without funds to provide adequate training, technical assistance, and nutrition education with which school districts might improve the nutritional quality of the meals they serve.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### *Ensure that Commodities Support the Dietary Guidelines for Americans*

The most effective way to align commodities with students' nutritional needs is to raise the nutrition standards for all foods served in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. All participants interviewed for this study indicated that school districts make commodity decisions in order to accommodate USDA-prescribed menu planning requirements and students' taste preferences. Therefore, commodity foods will change most rapidly in response to improvements in standards used to guide the nutritional quality of school meals.

1. USDA should strengthen the School Meals Initiative nutrition review by:
  - a. Quickly aligning the SMI standards with those of the current Dietary Guidelines and rapidly updating the SMI standards as future versions of the Guidelines appear
  - b. Performing the review on a weighted average of foods chosen by students rather than treating all offered foods equally
  - c. Performing the review more frequently than the current 5 year cycle prescribes
  - d. Include more schools within each school district's SMI review
2. USDA should continue to improve the nutritional quality of individual commodities, aligning them with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

3. USDA and California Department of Education (CDE), as appropriate, should establish and implement nutrition guidelines for processors to align processed commodities with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
4. Congress should set a required proportion among the major food groups (like USDA food based meal patterns) to which school districts must adhere when ordering federal commodities.
5. Congress should provide financial incentives to school districts to promote purchases of healthier foods, particularly fresh fruit and vegetables.
6. USDA should retain and strengthen the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (DOD Fresh) or develop a substitute service that provides fresh fruit and vegetables, crucial components of the commodity program.
7. Congress should increase funding for commodity fresh fruit and vegetables by giving school districts entitlement credits to obtain fresh fruit and vegetables for School Breakfast Program meals.
8. Congress should create a fund to supply school districts with grants for one-time-only infrastructure costs incurred to support the storage and preparation of fruit and vegetables, such as the creation or expansion of refrigeration and freezing capacity.

*Ensure Maximum Utilization of Commodities*

9. USDA should broadly publicize the scope and benefits of the commodity program. In addition, USDA should highlight the nutritional and operational improvements it has made to the program.
10. CDE/NSD should take steps to ensure that all California school districts participate in the commodity program and that each district utilizes its entire commodity entitlement.
11. CDE/NSD should strongly encourage each district to participate in either the state purchasing co-op or a private purchasing co-op and should develop a plan to strengthen these entities.
12. CDE/NSD should provide nutrition education, training, and technical assistance to school districts to promote full use of the healthiest commodity items.