

SUSAN M. COLLINS
MAINE

413 DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1904
(202) 224-2523
(202) 224-2693 (FAX)

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1904

COMMITTEES:
HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS,
RANKING MEMBER
APPROPRIATIONS
ARMED SERVICES
SPECIAL COMMITTEE
ON AGING

March 16, 2011

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your recent testimony before the Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee. I appreciate your efforts to support our nation's farmers, and your commitment to providing healthy foods through the federal nutrition programs administered by the Department of Agriculture.

As I indicated, I am concerned that the USDA proposed rule to alter the Meal Pattern Guidelines would place severe limitations on the amount of white potatoes that can be served in the National School Lunch Program. Further, this rule would prohibit serving white potatoes in the National School Breakfast Program. This proposed rule would not only drive up school meal program costs, forcing schools to revise their menus and purchase more expensive vegetables, but is based on, and thus perpetuates, the myth that potatoes are unhealthy.

Potatoes are nutritious vegetables that are rich in vitamin C, potassium, vitamin B6, dietary fiber, naturally low in fat, low in sodium, and cholesterol-free. Moreover, potatoes are inexpensive, are considerably easier to store and transport than many other vegetables and can be used in countless healthy recipes that children enjoy.

This proposed rule would increase school meal program costs, presenting a significant financial burden on lower-income families and struggling school districts. It may also fall short of its stated goals because children are less inclined to eat unfamiliar vegetables. Eliminating potatoes in favor of unfamiliar vegetables would cause more food waste and would deprive children of the nutrients contained in potatoes. There are alternative ways of promoting more healthy meals at America's schools without eliminating and severely limiting use of this household staple, and I would encourage you to consider them.

The national school breakfast and lunch programs are vital to ensuring that millions of American children don't go through school hungry; in some cases, these programs provide children with the majority of their daily calories. It is therefore especially important that

these programs serve high-quality, nutritious foods that are prepared in healthy ways and are appetizing to children.

I was encouraged that you agreed with me that potatoes are healthy and nutritious at our recent hearing. I would, therefore, respectfully request that you reconsider and revise the proposed rule to take into account the compelling nutritional value of the white potato and ease with which it can be prepared in countless healthy recipes. Specifically, I request that you:

- Eliminate the prohibition on serving white potatoes through the National School Breakfast Program, and replace it with guidelines that promote more healthy cooking of potatoes and other vegetables for breakfast; and,
- Revise the school lunch guidelines to eliminate limits on the maximum amount of starchy vegetables that can be served through the National School Lunch Program.

Again, thank you for your thorough consideration of and attention to this matter. I look forward to continuing to work with you to improve our nation's nutrition assistance programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan M. Collins". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator