

USDA Commodities: Healthy Choices & American Grown

Did You Know ...

... **Commodities account for 15–20% of school nutrition program food purchases.** That makes commodities a small, but important component of school meals. The remaining 80–85% of food is purchased by local schools or agencies from commercial vendors.

... **Schools districts are never required to accept any commodity item they cannot effectively use or do not want to use.** Schools are not dumping grounds for government commodities. Schools select the foods they want from USDA's foods availability list and have the option to receive bonus commodities if/when they become available. States are required to consider school district menu and distribution needs when ordering commodities on behalf of their schools.

... **USDA commodities are a healthy food choice.** USDA continually explores better ways to offer healthier food choices that help schools offer meals consistent with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and the *MyPyramid* food guidance system. Commodities are available in a variety of convenient products that are safe, wholesome, and 100% American grown.

... **USDA's commodity improvements are keeping pace with current nutrition and health advancements:**

- **Less Sodium (salt):** Most USDA canned vegetables meet the Food and Drug Administration's "healthy" standard for sodium, which is less than or equal to 480 mg per serving. In School Year 2009 USDA intends to lower the sodium content of canned vegetables even more. Schools continue to have the option to order salt free frozen vegetables.
- **More Fresh Fruits and Vegetables:** USDA pioneered a partnership with the Department of Defense's Supply Center in Philadelphia to buy more than 60 types of fresh fruits and vegetables for schools. These purchases increased from \$4 million in FY 1993 to \$50 million per year since FY 2003. This is in addition to more than \$8 million of fresh items that USDA now purchases for schools each year. Besides fresh produce, USDA also purchases over \$180 million of canned, frozen, and dried fruits and vegetables for schools.
- **More Whole Grains:** In addition to whole grain foods such as brown rice, rolled oats, whole wheat flour, and whole grain dry kernel corn, USDA is now purchasing whole grain pastas (spaghetti and rotini) for School Year 2007-08. Currently, USDA is also pursuing the purchase of whole grain macaroni and quick-cook brown rice.
- **Less Sugar:** Canned fruits must be packed in light syrup, water, or natural juices. Despite the tendency of industry to pack in heavy syrup, USDA has not purchased fruit in heavy syrup in over 10 years. Unsweetened applesauce is now available to schools in 2007-08.
- **Less Fat:** Since 1992, commodity beef is 85% lean compared to commercial standard ground meat at 70% lean. In the 1980's, most commodity beef products contained an average of 24% fat. Since 1992, schools have had the option of ordering beef patties with a fat level as low as 10%. USDA has recently offered a lower-fat turkey taco filling and frozen diced chicken, 97% lean ham, and 95% lean turkey ham. Currently, USDA is evaluating a 95% lean beef patty.

In addition to leaner meat and poultry items, USDA takes other steps to lower fat in commodities:

- USDA offers part skim milk mozzarella and several types of reduced-fat/lite cheese, i.e., reduced-fat processed cheese and lite shredded mozzarella cheese.
- To manufacture a leaner finished poultry product, processors are substituting lean meat for skin and fat in processed poultry products.
- Trans-fats have been eliminated from frozen potato products effective School Year 2007-08 and a fat-free potato wedge is being evaluated.
- Shortening was eliminated as an ordering option effective School Year 2007-08.
- Butter was eliminated as an ordering option to schools in 1997.

... USDA commodities are available to any school that participates in the National School Lunch Program. Recipients of USDA commodities include the school meals programs, among others. USDA also provides commodities as a form of emergency food relief to people who experience the effects of natural disasters.

... Bonus commodities are optional foods offered to States and school districts. Bonus commodities are purchased periodically by USDA in order to stabilize the agricultural market and then offered to schools and school districts as an option. If taken, bonus commodities are received by schools or school districts over and above the commodities USDA regularly plans for and purchases with appropriated funds, well in advance of each school year, based on the States' ordering history.

... Commodities represent a wide spectrum of convenient products. School districts and States can select from a wide variety of commodities that match their needs. In 1981, USDA offered schools 54 commodity products. Today, over 180 are offered. In addition, USDA now offers more frozen, fresh, and refrigerated products, more package sizes, and more varieties of specific foods. For example, chicken is offered diced, cut-up, breaded, as fajita strips, bulk for reprocessing, etc. in response to customer demand.

... Schools can convert their commodities into ready-to-use end products. A school or State Distributing Agency (SDA) may *voluntarily* enter into a processing agreement with a food processor to convert a USDA commodity into a ready-to-use end product. Approximately 50% of the value of USDA commodities available to schools is diverted by schools for further processing. This option gives the ordering agencies control over what end products are made and the nutrient profile of those end products for their nutrition program. Establishing the nutrient standards for processed end products, and sharing their standards with processors, becomes the sole privilege of the school or SDA who orders the end product.

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For more information go to: <http://www.commodityfoods.usda.gov>