



Potato Monthly: March 2021



Food Policy

Tom Vilsack Confirmed Secretary of Agriculture

In late February, the Senate confirmed Tom Vilsack as the next Secretary of Agriculture with a vote of 92 to 7. Vilsack previously served as the Nation's 30th Secretary of Agriculture under President Obama. With this confirmation, it is anticipated that USDA's food and nutrition regulatory activity will increase in pace now that their new leader is in place.

Senate Passes Food Allergen Legislation

The Senate has passed the "Food Allergy Safety, Treatment, Education and Research Act of 2021" (FASTER Act), which would require that sesame be labeled as an allergen on packaged foods, making sesame the ninth food allergen for which the FDA requires plain-language labeling. This would affect the labeling of all packaged potato products that include some form of sesame as an ingredient. The bill would also require the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) to issue a report on scientific opportunities in food allergy research. The same bipartisan bill was introduced in the House in late February.

USDA School Meal Waivers

On March 9th, the USDA announced the nationwide extension of several waivers that will allow children to continue to receive school meals over the summer. These waivers will allow meals served through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to be available in all areas at no cost, waive congregate meal requirements, and allow parents and guardians to pick up meals in bulk for children not in attendance at in-person learning. These flexibilities are now extended through September 30, 2021.

Nutrition Policy

Nutrition Aid Included in Stimulus Package

The most recent COVID-19 stimulus package includes an extension of the Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) program for the entirety of the COVID-19 public health emergency. Through P-EBT, eligible school children receive temporary emergency nutrition benefits loaded on EBT cards that are used to purchase food.

The package also includes \$390 million for outreach, innovation, and program modernization efforts to improve participation and benefit redemption in the WIC program as well as allowance for up to a \$35 boost in the value of the Cash Value Voucher (CVV) for the purchase of fruits and vegetables. The stimulus package initially passed in the House, and then was passed by the Senate and is now being reconsidered by the House for final passage before being sent to the President.

Child Nutrition Reauthorization Update

Conversations on the Hill continue to suggest that Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) remains a top priority for Congress to tackle in 2021 in order to free up attention in 2022 for updating the Farm Bill. Reauthorization would likely be led by the Senate, with Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) continuing to show interest in leading CNR. This effort is expected to begin with a hearing in early spring. As a reminder, CNR refers to Congress's process of making changes, additions, and deletions to the permanent statutes that authorize the child nutrition and federal food assistance programs, like WIC, the National School Lunch Program, and the School Breakfast Program.



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Food Safety + Ag

New USDA Food Purchase/Distribution Program

The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is accepting public input on the development of a new food purchase and distribution program to help food banks and other anti-hunger nonprofits. The new initiative would effectively replace the Farmers to Families Food Box effort created by the Trump administration last April. Written comments will be accepted until March 31st. AMS will also hold a virtual listening session on March 22nd where individuals and groups can provide oral feedback. Registration is required for the listening session by March 17th (spots are limited).

USDA Fruit and Vegetable Advisory Committee

The USDA Fruit and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee has scheduled a public, virtual meeting for Tuesday, April 6th. The meeting is being convened to examine the full spectrum of fruit and vegetable industry issues and to provide recommendations and ideas to the Secretary of Agriculture on how USDA can tailor programs and services to better meet the needs of the US produce industry. The deadline to submit written comments and/or sign up for oral comments is March 16th.

Heavy Metals in Baby Foods

In early February, the House Oversight Subcommittee reported findings of heavy metals in fruit, vegetable, and grain-based baby foods. The subcommittee is now reportedly working on a bill that would require FDA to come up with standards for heavy metals in baby foods and put in place testing requirements.

Since the report publication, FDA has issued a letter to industry reminding manufacturers of baby foods of their existing responsibilities related to minimizing chemical hazards. The Agency also announced they will soon be putting into action a plan aimed at reducing toxic elements in foods for babies and young children to levels as low as is reasonably achievable.

Nutrition Science

US Adult Fruit and Vegetable Consumption

A recent National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief showed that 95% of US adults said they ate some number of vegetables on any given day. The percentage of adults who consumed any fruit on a given day decreased from 77.2% to 64.9% from 1999-2000 through 2017-2018, while there was no change in the percentage of adults who consumed any vegetables on a given day. The brief also noted that a higher percentage of women consumed dark green and starchy vegetables on a given day compared to men.

Love Potatoes? You Favorite Veggie and Good Carb Loves You Back

This past month, tapping into conversations around Heart Health Month and Valentine's Day, Potatoes USA partner and registered dietitian Cara Harbstreet published a blog and Instagram post detailing how, as a nutrient-dense vegetable and energy-packed good carb, potatoes don't make you choose between a food you love and a food that is good for you. Potatoes USA supplemented Harbstreet's message via Potato Goodness social channels, media outreach that resulted in potato-positive articles in *Eating Well* and the Cleveland Clinic blog, and by authoring a release on '5 ways America's most loved vegetable loves you back.'