



Potato Monthly: April 2021



Food & Nutrition Policy

USDA Expansion of SNAP Benefits

The USDA recently announced a 15% increase in SNAP benefits through September 2021, which was directed by President Biden's American Rescue Plan. This will provide an estimated \$3.5 billion to households experiencing food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This equates to about an additional \$28 more per person or \$100 more per household each month.

The USDA also plans to open up additional SNAP benefits to households who were previously deemed ineligible for additional emergency payments because they were already receiving the maximum monthly benefit. Households that had not received at least \$95 per month in increased benefits through emergency allotments during the pandemic will now be eligible to receive these additional benefits. The policy change is expected to take effect in April and will provide \$1 billion per month in additional food assistance to about 25 million people in very low-income households.

USDA "Nutrition Security" Priorities

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack has appeared at a variety of speaking engagements since his confirmation urging for a focus on strengthening nutrition programs like SNAP and WIC, particularly as the pandemic drags on. Secretary Vilsack has also discussed at length about the need to improve "nutrition security" and noted that policymakers often address hunger and improving nutrition as separate issues when they should be considered as one issue.

An opinion piece, "Prioritizing Nutrition Security in the US," was recently published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and co-authored by Dariush Mozaffarian, Sheila Fleschhacker, and Jose Andres. The piece draws attention to US policy needing to address diet-related challenges through nutrition to address hunger and food insecurity instead of focusing on providing sufficient calories and quantities of food.

USDA Extends Free School Meals through Summer 2021

On March 9th, the USDA announced the nationwide extension of several waivers that allow children to continue to receive school meals over the summer. These waivers will allow meals served through the Summer Food Service Program 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 available through September 30th. Secretary Vilsack also announced that USDA expects to make a decision in April on whether to allow additional meal pattern flexibilities and also whether to allow schools to continue serving universal free meals next school year.

The WIC Act of 2021

A bipartisan group of lawmakers in the House and Senate have reintroduced the Wise Investment in Our Children Act (WIC Act) of 2021. This bill (S. 853) would extend the WIC eligibility date until a child's sixth birthday, extend the certification period to two years, and extend post-partum eligibility to two years for all mothers.

Child Nutrition Reauthorization Update

The US Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry held a public hearing on March 25th, titled 'Child Nutrition Reauthorization: Healthy Meals and Healthy Futures.' The hearing included testimonies from six different witnesses, including physicians, and leaders in WIC, food banks, food service and other nutrition services. The session provided an opportunity for a robust conversation around the desire to provide healthy foods while balancing challenges with building meals children will enjoy that can meet strict standards for sodium, whole grains, and milk.

Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman stated they are both committed to passing a bipartisan Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) bill. 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.

During the hearing, potatoes being served at breakfast in school meals was not discussed. On the WIC front, Senator Boozman suggested that new technologies should be considered, such as online purchasing of food. Multiple witnesses also endorsed online WIC purchasing as well as support for the WIC Act.

US Allergen Labeling Update

In early March, the Senate 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. Sesame would become the ninth food allergen for which the FDA requires plain-language labeling. This would affect any packaged food product that contains sesame or sesame-derived ingredients, including packaged potato products. The same bipartisan bill was introduced in the House in late February and is expected to pass.



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Food Safety + Ag

Nutrition Science

Baby Food Safety Act of 2021

After a House Oversight Subcommittee report published findings of heavy metals in baby foods, members of the House have now introduced the Baby Food Safety Act of 2021. This bill would establish initial action levels and standards for heavy metals in baby foods and require FDA to further refine the action levels based on scientific evidence within two years. Initial action levels are set for inorganic arsenic, cadmium, lead, and mercury. The bill defines infant and toddler food as any food intended for sale to children up to 36 months of age. If passed, these bill requirements would apply to baby foods containing white potatoes.

FDA Action on Heavy Metals in Baby Food

In response to the House Oversight Subcommittee report, the FDA announced that 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. As part of this effort, FDA intends to address the following areas:

- Issuing guidance to identify action levels for contaminants in key foods and providing guidance to industry on how to meet their obligations under current regulations;
- Increasing inspections and, as appropriate, taking compliance and enforcement actions;
- Boosting sampling of foods for babies and young children, and sharing the results; and
- Working with government, academia, and industry to support research and development of additional safety information on toxic elements in foods for babies and young children and additional steps that industry can take to further reduce levels.

In line with this agenda, FDA draft guidances for industry related to action levels for lead in juice and action levels for inorganic arsenic in apple juice are currently under review by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

US-Mexico Trade Issues

A group of 27 food and agriculture associations in the US, including NPC, sent a letter to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai regarding growing concerns over the state of the US-Mexico trade relationship. Some of the concerns outlined in the letter included the potato export ban and the new front-of-pack labeling requirements.

Potato Resistant Starch Inhibits Diet-Induced Obesity in Obese Mice

Studies have shown that potato resistant starch type 3 (PRS) is helpful for weight loss. A recent study, published in *International Journal of Biological Macromolecules*, investigated the effects of PRS on high-fat diet (HFD)-induced obesity in mice. In the study, different doses of PRS (5%, 15% and 25%) were fed to mice for 12 weeks and researchers assessed the relationship among PRS and metabolic syndrome related to obesity. They found that the PRS helped reduce the metabolic syndrome effects of a HFD (increased blood pressure, high blood sugar, excess body fat, abnormal cholesterol levels, etc.) and thus PRS may be a potential agent for preventing HFD-induced obesity. Results of this study, while positive, should be interpreted carefully as it was conducted in mice and may not be directly applicable to humans.

Spring into Wellness with Potatoes

Late March ushered in the first day of Spring and the change of seasons is a cue for more than spring cleaning — it is also a great time to refocus on self-care. Self-care considers your mental, physical and emotional wellness, which start with the foods you eat. Potatoes USA partner and registered dietitian Cara Harbstreet offered her expertise to top-tier media on how to promote our everyday wellness, and how potatoes, as a nutrient-dense vegetable and good carb, are a fresh and nourishing addition to your routine. The article topics were highlighted in Harbstreet's blog, an Instagram post, and in a Potatoes USA article.

FDA Releases Food Safety and Nutrition Survey Results

The FDA has released the latest results of its Food Safety and Nutrition Survey (FSANS), which is designed to assess consumer awareness, knowledge, understanding and reported behaviors relating to a variety of food safety and nutrition related topics. Some key findings include:

- Most consumers are familiar with the Nutrition Facts label, with 87% of respondents having looked at the Nutrition Facts label on food packages. Calories, total sugar, sodium, and serving size are the top four items that consumers look for on the label.
- Consumers are familiar with front-of-pack claims.

Ultra-Processed Foods and Heart Disease Risks

A study in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* found that individuals with a higher intake of ultra-processed foods were more likely to suffer from cardiovascular (CVD) diseases and coronary heart disease compared with those with lower intake. The findings are based on data from 3,003 American adults. The study also revealed that higher intake of ultra-processed foods was linked to lower levels of exercise and education.