

CALIFORNIA SENATE OFFICE OF RESEARCH

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Federal Update

NUTRITIONAL REQUIREMENTS RELAXED FOR SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAMS

United States Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue signed a proclamation earlier this month loosening federal regulations in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs. Citing the challenges faced by schools and food service providers in meeting the Obama administration's final regulations for school meals, Secretary Perdue's changes give schools and states more time to comply with the requirements for whole grains and sodium levels and also expand the rules for milk. In so doing, Secretary Perdue begins the process of restoring local control of guidelines on whole grains, sodium, and milk served in school meals.

BACKGROUND

The National School Lunch Program, a federal meal assistance program signed into law by President Harry S. Truman in 1946, operates in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. The program assists schools and agencies in providing nutritious lunches to children at reasonable prices. While the program is overseen nationally by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), in California the program is administered through the Department of Education's Nutrition Services Division, which provides approximately 2.3 million children and youth free or reduced-price lunches.

The federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 marked a significant effort to improve the healthfulness of school lunches and made other changes to existing nutrition programs. The act included important changes to the nutrition standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs, including new requirements for offering fruits and vegetables daily and increasing offerings of whole-grain-rich foods. The requirements also limited calories and established standards for the amounts of saturated fat, trans fats, and sodium in meals.

CHANGES TO SCHOOL FOOD RULES

Schools accepting federal reimbursements for free and reduced-price meals for low-income students are required to follow government nutrition rules. Secretary Perdue's proclamation issued on May 1 gives states and schools the following flexibilities previously disallowed by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010:

- Permits states to exempt schools from the requirement to replace all their grains with whole-grain-rich products in the 2017–18 school year if they are having difficulty meeting this standard.
- Postpones increased sodium reductions for at least three years, until 2020. Currently, in order to be compliant, sodium levels in school lunches must average less than 1,230 mg in elementary schools, 1,360 mg in middle schools and 1,420 mg in high school. Schools were expected to reduce sodium even further by July of this year.
- Begins the regulatory process to allow schools to serve 1-percent flavored milk. Prior to this, schools could only provide flavor in fat-free milk.

Secretary Perdue's proclamation left fruit, vegetable, and calorie requirements in place. While the changes made do not reduce the standards set forth in the regulations established by the Obama administration, schools are now provided with more leniency and time in moving forward toward nutritional targets for whole grains and sodium. It is unclear, however, whether these changes could signal further regulatory actions down the road. Secretary Perdue has indicated that USDA will work on long term solutions to further tweak the regulations.

IMPACT ON CALIFORNIA

School districts in California have been notified by the California Department of Education of the new greater flexibility in nutrition requirements for school meal programs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that California schools are not experiencing difficulty in finding grain products such as bread, oatmeal, and noodles that are "whole-grain-rich" – that is, at least half the product is whole grain, and the rest can be processed but enriched with vitamins and minerals. Reductions to sodium, or salt, is more complicated, with its increasingly lower targets that vary slightly by age.

To read the proclamation by the Secretary of Agriculture, go to:

<https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/secretary-perdue-child-nutrition-proclamation.pdf>

Written by Lisa Giroux. The California Senate Office of Research is a nonpartisan office charged with serving the research needs of the California State Senate and assisting Senate members and committees with the development of effective public policy. The office was established by the Senate Rules Committee in 1969. For more information, please visit <http://sor.senate.ca.gov> or call (916) 651-1500.
