

Wheat Farmers Have a Stake in New School Nutrition Standards

For the past few years, First Lady Michelle Obama has made exercise and a healthy diet a priority for this nation's young people. On Wednesday, the White House and USDA announced improved nutrition standards for school lunches. And as it turns out, Kansas wheat farmers have a stake in the new standards.

Among the changes:

- *Ensuring students are offered both fruits and vegetables every day of the week;
- *Substantially increasing offerings of whole grain-rich foods;
- *Offering only fat-free or low-fat milk varieties;
- *Limiting calories based on the age of children being served to ensure proper portion size; and
- *Increasing the focus on reducing the amounts of saturated fat, trans fats and sodium.

For a few years, Kansas schools have been meeting these new nutrition standards, according to Cheryl Johnson, director of child nutrition and wellness for the Kansas State Department of Education. A registered dietitian, Johnson said, "Our schools do a great job of providing healthy meals for children. Most of our schools have already added fruits, vegetables and whole grains to their menus."

Through the Kansas wheat checkoff, Kansas wheat farmers have provided numerous resources to help teach school nutrition experts how to incorporate more wheat foods into their menus. More than a decade ago, the Wheat Foods Council, which the Kansas Wheat Commission supports financially, developed a whole grain education program and packet of resources that included recipes. These were presented to School Food Service Association's state conferences across the nation.

"Part of the resource materials included how to market their school food service meals to the students and community," says Cindy Falk, nutrition educator for Kansas Wheat.

Adding whole grain foods isn't difficult; in fact, kids enjoy one whole grain recipe in numerous forms.

"A lot of our schools use a 51% whole white wheat dough recipe that is made from scratch and is the base for rolls, cinnamon rolls and bread," Johnson said. "We get great feedback from students and we have shared that recipe with several other states. We are a believer in whole grains."

Kevin Concannon, Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, says the 280-page "Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010" will help accomplish the First Lady's efforts to curb childhood obesity, while providing foods critical to helping children learn and be healthy.

The federal School lunch Program feeds more than 32 million students each day. In the last 18 months, more than 130,000 comments have been received by parents, educators and stakeholders; the USDA used those comments to develop science-based guidelines. These are the first changes to the school lunch program nutrition standards in 15 years.

And they are changes for the better, notes Johnson, who says school food services are challenged because there are students who eat too much, and those who go hungry every day.

"The change to having more fruits and vegetables and whole grain foods is a good change. It's evident that USDA is trying to address both these challenges," she says.

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The Kansas Wheat Commission is a grower-funded, grower-governed advocacy organization working to secure the future of Kansas wheat in the global market through research, education and market development. It is funded by a voluntary 1.5 cent assessment on each bushel of wheat produced in Kansas.