



**International Dairy Foods Association**

Milk Industry Foundation

National Cheese Institute

International Ice Cream Association

## **Senate and House of Representatives Staff Briefing**

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1. I'm Dr. Richard Merrill with the Leprino Foods Company, a member of the International Dairy Foods Association. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's panel and provide a perspective of food companies across the country who participate in this program. As a researcher I will also describe research and development that has gone into new products for USDA's commodity foods program.
2. Thanks to USDA and Congress, schools today can choose from a much broader variety of foods under this program, making it easier to create menus with less fat and sodium, more whole grains and fresh produce than historically has been the case. This being the case, regulations and guidelines must strike a balance between nutritional goals and the reality of what kids will eat.
  - a. Dairy products are an essential part of school lunches because they are highly nutritious, providing protein and essential nutrients, like calcium, that are deficient in school age children. With current food selection practices, consumption of dairy products may constitute the difference between getting enough calcium in one's diet or not.
    - i. However, we recognize that a variety of cheeses are needed so that schools can more easily provide entrees that fall under USDA's meal plan guidelines. We have focused research and development on developing products with reduced fat and sodium that still function well on foods that kids like.
  - b. The best example of this might be pizza – very popular with kids but often criticized under this program; yet pizza is a nutrient rich food meaning you get a lot of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients for fewer calories and commonly containing 3-4 of the 5 food groups. The challenge to food manufacturers is how to make significant improvements to the nutritional profile of the foods while minimally affecting taste.
  - c. Concurrently, we are firm believers that school lunches must serve foods that children enjoy or they will opt to go off campus and, most likely, will consume less healthy foods. Our commitment to being part of the solution to the obesity epidemic has inspired our participation in several programs that have proven the

palatability and appeal of more healthful products. I would like to comment briefly on a few of them:

i. Denver Public Schools Study

1. Leprino, along with several other food manufacturers, participated in a “stealth health” study designed to evaluate student acceptance of popular school lunch items, like pizza, French fries and chicken nuggets that are reduced in fat and energy density.
2. This study engaged participating food manufacturers to make significant improvements to the nutritional profile of the foods while minimally affecting taste.
3. Researchers found that meal participation did not change after introducing the modified foods. Although some ratings for appearance and palatability decreased for the modified foods, these decreases were small and they were still rated by students as acceptable.
4. We learn from this experience that making small changes to the most popular foods can lead to significant improvements in the overall nutritional composition of consumed items.

ii. St. Vrain School Lunch Pizza

1. Another great example of how schools and industry and USDA have worked together to improve the nutrition being delivered to our children lies right in my backyard in the St Vrain school district of Colorado. The school district worked with a national pizza brand to develop pizza that meets USDA meal requirements but also the picky taste buds of kids. The pizza uses 100% lite Mozzarella (50% less fat and saturated fat than the part-skim mozzarella often used), and also delivers 100 fewer calories, and more protein per slice of pizza.
2. By participating, the school saves money on labor, energy and transportation costs
3. Since implementing this pizza program, the district has reduced costs and seen a 25% increase in school lunch participation. St Vrain bundles the lower fat pizza offerings with salads, fruits, and low fat milk to make a complete reimbursable meal.

4. St Vrain has also worked with its national brand partner to decrease the sodium in its sauce, and to add whole grains to the crust. This collaborative innovation makes parents and USDA happy, but for the kids, it's all about the taste.
      5. The pizza being served as part of this innovative program supports the school's mission to provide a healthy well-balanced meal that in turn supports their education throughout the day.
    - iii. Lite string cheese
      1. Another area outside the traditional school lunch program where a lite cheese would be far superior to alternatives is for snacks served in schools. Providing lite string cheese as a school snack would provide students all the essential nutrients of cheese in fewer calories than traditional snack foods.
      2. Following this briefing you will have an opportunity to sample the school lunch pizza and lite string cheese I have referred to.
    - iv. Earlier generations of reduced fat and lite cheeses generally suffered from inferior performance and palatability characteristics. That is not the case today. Many cheese companies now sell USDA cheeses lower in fat and sodium with the functional characteristics of their full fat counterparts. Several cheese makers now successfully compete in USDA's reduced fat and lite bids.
  3. We believe that USDA's commodity program plays a critical role in the school lunch program.
    - a. USDA can accelerate the development of healthy foods through their actions because they can provide the critical mass that justifies investment by manufacturers in new product development and manufacturing. Individual school districts will be less successful because they often lack the scale necessary to enable efficient change.
    - b. We do not think that the dairy industry is unique among the food industry in being interested in developing foods to meet the nutrition and health objectives of schools, either through USDA's commodity programs or directly.
      - i. The key to improved nutrition is not to ban food categories that are perceived negatively, but to set the targets for nutritional profiles and let innovative food manufacturers innovate to meet those targets.

4. We applaud Senator Lincoln's efforts to provide funding and encouragement to USDA to disseminate information regarding the use of healthy commodity products through the commodity program.
  - a. Ultimately, USDA procures the products that the schools intend to order for the school year. Information and support regarding how to best use new products are barriers to schools ordering the healthier versions of certain foods. Education can also contribute to increased consumption of other food groups to encourage, such as broccoli. A recent study shows that the use of commodity cheese to dress up vegetables significantly improves the chance that the nutrients in the vegetables are consumed by children rather than being land filled or composted.
5. I would like to end with a request that Congress recognize the higher cost of improved nutrition and increase budgets accordingly.
  - a. For example, lower fat cheeses are more expensive than their full fat counterparts because the fat is displaced by milk proteins that due to marketplace and government factors cost more.
6. At Leprino Foods Company, and on behalf of the International Dairy Foods Association, we thank the NANA coalition and Senator Lincoln for sponsoring this briefing and I look forward to answering questions at the conclusion of the panel presentation.