



International Dairy Foods Association

Milk Industry Foundation

National Cheese Institute

International Ice Cream Association

December 11, 2008

Nancy Montanez Johner
Under Secretary
Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington DC 20250

Dear Under Secretary Johner:

The National Cheese Institute, which represents the majority of the nation's cheese manufacturers, commends the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) for the improvements it is making in the commodity foods provided through the Department of Agriculture's Child Nutrition Programs. Under your leadership, the types of foods that USDA offers to states and schools is changing to conform to the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and to keep pace with current nutrition and health advancements.

NCI is part of the International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA), which represents the dairy manufacturing and marketing industries and their suppliers. IDFA's 220 dairy processing members run more than 600 plant operations, and range from large multi-national organizations to single-plant companies. Together they represent more than 85% of the milk, cultured products, cheese and frozen desserts produced and marketed in the United States. Most of the cheese companies on USDA's qualified bidders list are IDFA members.

The Food and Nutrition Service has made great strides in emphasizing lower fat meats and poultry products, more whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as offering some lower fat cheese varieties. Despite these improvements, there remains an outdated public perception that USDA uses the school nutrition programs to unload surplus commodities, particularly cheese.

To help address this issue, and to encourage adoption of the array of new and improved lower fat and reduced fat cheeses that are now available in the marketplace, the National Cheese Institute proposes that USDA adopt a formal policy that only reduced fat and light cheeses be included on the "foods available" list used by schools for their lunch programs. This recommendation was part of a proposal made on our behalf by the International Dairy Foods Association during the recent listening sessions.

Like the successful transition to lower fat meats, we believe that reduced fat and light cheeses will be readily adopted by commercial food processors who partner with the schools and State agencies in providing entrees and snacks. This policy will encourage food manufacturers to lower the fat content of foods that use cheese, while still providing all of the nutritional benefits of cheese.

Cheeses are nutrient-dense and one of the dairy foods recommended for consumption by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. In addition to providing protein, calcium, magnesium, phosphorous, zinc, and vitamins such as A, riboflavin (B2) and B12, cheese is also naturally low in lactose. Importantly, reduced fat cheese provides these nutrients to students who may not regularly consume fluid milk products because of their lactose content.

Low and reduced fat cheeses are being sought by more and more consumers in the marketplace, and their use in foods served in schools has been successful. In fact, The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management recently published results of an evaluation of how well students accept pizza, the most popular entree served in schools, when it is made with lower fat cheese.¹ We have a copy of the data.

The National Cheese Institute supports maintaining the current emphasis on high protein foods under the National School Lunch act and increasing the available funding for high quality, healthier USDA foods, including cheese. Along with the price of milk, the price of cheese has gone up in recent years, resulting in less cheese available to schools. The higher protein content and additional manufacturing required to produce lower fat cheeses will require increased funding to meet the cheese volume historically requested under the Child Nutrition programs.

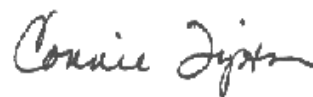
As the Food and Nutrition Service continually explores more ways to offer healthy food choices in schools, we encourage you to consider our recommendation to offer reduced fat and light cheeses under USDA's commodity food program, and to begin implementation of this policy with the 2009 - 2010 school year. We would be happy to provide our assistance as the Food and Nutrition Service considers this proposal.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Mr. Gary Vanic
President and CEO
Great Lakes Cheese Co., Inc.
Chairman National Cheese Institute



Connie Tipton
President & CEO
International Dairy Foods Association

cc: Mr. Bart Chilton, Co-Chair Obama-Biden USDA transition team
Ms. Carole Jett, Co-Chair Obama-Biden USDA transition team

1 A "Small-Changes" Approach to Improving the Nutritional Quality of School Menu Items, by Nanett Stoeblele, PhD et.al. The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management Issue 2, Fall 2006.