



# Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

May 26, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Congratulations on your confirmation as the 32nd Secretary of Agriculture. We look forward to partnering with you on agriculture and nutrition policy as our country continues to manage the unique challenges wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As you are no doubt aware, the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee report found that 79 percent of 9–13-year-olds, who rely on the school meal programs to meet their nutritional needs, are not meeting the recommended intake of dairy foods. Both the 2015 and 2020 editions of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) amplified this concern, stating that, beginning at a young age, average dairy consumption falls short of recommended amounts.

This is a significant concern. The underconsumption of milk and other dairy foods carries both nutritional and health risks: milk plays a central role in providing essential nutrients of public health concern, including calcium, potassium, and vitamin D. Healthy eating patterns are associated with a lower risk of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. To increase dairy intake, the DGAs recommend consumption of low-fat and fat-free milk and other dairy products.

In this context, we greatly appreciated your comments before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture-FDA last month attesting to the importance of milk consumption among our nation's youth and calling attention to the essential nutrients that milk includes. We are eager to work with you to make it a priority to encourage increased consumption of milk by our nation's youth. One of the best ways to encourage healthy eating is within the federal school meal programs under your jurisdiction. Evidence clearly shows that when students choose school meals, they receive a better and more balanced diet. They are also more likely to choose milk: the recent School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study shows that students who participate in the National School Lunch Program are almost three times as likely to have milk with their lunch as their peers who do not participate.

As you know, current law requires school milk varieties to be consistent with the DGAs and specifically permits flavored milk. Accordingly, we believe schools should continue to have the option to offer low-fat flavored milk, which remains consistent with the most recent DGAs. The DGAs state that adding limited amounts of sweeteners to nutrient-dense foods like milk can increase consumption. Moreover, low-fat flavored milk is a nutrient dense option for improving the quality of children's diets, with only 20-40 more calories and only 0.6 gram more saturated fat than non-fat flavored varieties. In fact, flavored milk in schools today has 55 percent less added sugar than just a few years ago because schools have worked with processors to reduce sugar levels. Most flavored milks meet or beat the sugar limit recommended by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (formerly the Institute of Medicine), which is no more than 22 grams of total sugar in flavored milk.

Surveys have shown that students drank less milk when all flavored milk was required to be fat-free. One survey conducted by the Milk Processor Education Program, which is overseen by USDA, determined that from 2012 (when low-fat flavored milk was removed as an option in schools) to 2018, school milk volume declined from 452 million gallons to 403 million gallons in – a decrease of 10.8 percent. In turn, when schools were again able to offer this variety, respondents to a survey said students liked the milk better and consumption rose. A survey of over 300 schools that offered low-fat flavored milk under waiver authority in the 2017-18 school year found that 58% of schools saw an increase in milk sold and 82% reported that it was easy or very easy to accommodate low-fat flavored milk within the calorie maximum for their menus.

As we work together to confront the many food and nutrition challenges facing our population, we would like to work with you to explore the best path forward to ensure schools can choose which varieties of milk to serve from all options consistent with the DGAs. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Joe Courtney  
Member of Congress



Glenn "GT" Thompson  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Cindy Axne  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Jim Banks  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Don Bacon  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Cheri Bustos  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Ben Cline  
Member of Congress

/s/  
J. Luis Correa  
Member of Congress

/s/  
Angie Craig  
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Suzan K. DelBene  
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Jeff Van Drew  
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Michelle Fischbach  
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Vicente Gonzalez  
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Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.  
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Matt Cartwright  
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James Comer  
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Jim Costa  
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Henry Cuellar  
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Tom Emmer  
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Josh Harder  
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