

American Academy
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National WIC Association



21 March 2014

The Hon. Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
Jamie L. Whitten Federal Building
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 200-A
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to express our gratitude for the release of the Final Rule on Revisions to the WIC Food Packages, for the exciting changes included in the Final Rule, and for your courage in standing firm in basing the food package on science. We also applaud your intention to jump-start the next review of the WIC food package so that lingering questions posed by the potato industry can be resolved. Nevertheless, we remain tremendously concerned about ramped up Congressional efforts to intervene in the process of determining what foods are provided by the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

We oppose any effort to include language in any legislation that would dictate the content of the WIC food package or require the inclusion of fresh white potatoes in the WIC food packages. Such a provision would override the sound scientific judgment of our nation's leading nutrition science experts who spent years studying what foods should be included in the WIC food package. Efforts to change the WIC food package because of pressure from the potato industry, or any food industry group for that matter, jeopardize WIC's effectiveness. Repeated efforts to include language in the FY 2013 and FY 2014 Agriculture Appropriations bills and the FARMM Bill were ultimately rejected. Still, potato industry supporters persist.

WIC is regarded as one of the most successful of all federal programs with a 72% public approval rating.¹ A significant body of research has consistently found that WIC contributes to healthier birth outcomes and improved nutrition, while reducing our nation's health care costs. An important reason for WIC's success is that the program provides a science-based food package to *supplement and enhance* the diets of women and young children, providing only foods that tend to be missing from their diets.

¹ Melman Group, American Viewpoint, Bipartisan Public Opinion Poll, November 2011.

As you know, it took over eight years to complete USDA's rigorous, science-based process to evaluate what changes should be made to the WIC food packages with the help of the Institute of Medicine (IOM). Among the IOM's 2005 recommendations to USDA was to provide vouchers that would enable WIC participants to purchase a variety of fruits and vegetables. The IOM did not include white potatoes as one of the vegetables that WIC participants could purchase through the program because white potatoes are the most widely consumed vegetable and WIC participants already consume them in recommended amounts. Thus, WIC participants' diets do not need to be supplemented with additional potatoes. USDA's final regulations, published this month, closely adhere to the IOM recommendations and are strongly supported by nutrition and health experts.

The potato industry argues that the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) have increased the number of recommended cups of starchy vegetables from the 2005 DGA and suggests that the USDA update the WIC food package regulations to reflect the change. The appropriate way to ensure that the WIC food package remains science-based is to engage the IOM to conduct another review of the latest nutrition science, including consumption data. We applaud you for taking that step by jump-starting the next review of the WIC food package. We know that you appreciate WIC's supplemental nature, providing the key nutrients that nutrition scientists have determined are lacking in the diets of low-income families. WIC does not, nor is it intended to, provide a full market basket of foods. Potatoes have never been included in the WIC food package, and WIC families are not prevented or discouraged from purchasing potatoes with their own resources or other federal nutrition benefits. In fact, we appreciate the commitment in the Final Rule to nutrition education that continues "to include white potatoes as a healthy source of nutrients and an important part of a healthful diet."

We urge you in the strongest possible terms to reject any effort to introduce political, non-science-based elements into the composition of WIC food packages. We urge you to stay the course and continue to depend on the sound scientific expert recommendations of the Institute of Medicine when considering changes to the WIC food packages. Millions of WIC mothers and young children are depending upon you.

If we may provide further information, please contact Martelle Esposito with the National WIC Association at mesposito@nwica.org or 202.232.5492.

Kind Regards,

American Academy of Pediatrics
American Public Health Association
Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
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Center for Science in the Public Interest
First Focus Campaign for Children
Food Research and Action Center
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