

Congress pushes back on healthier school lunches

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FILE - In this Sept. 14, 2011 file photo, fresh fries are scooped into containers during lunch at Gardiner High School in Gardiner, Maine. Congress wants to keep pizza and french fries on school lunch lines, fighting back against an Obama administration proposal to make school lunches healthier. The final version of a spending bill released late Monday would unravel school lunch standards the Agriculture Department proposed earlier this year, which included limiting the use of potatoes on the lunch line and delaying limits on sodium and delaying a requirement to boost whole grains. (AP Photo/Pat Wellenbach)

(AP) -- Who needs leafy greens and carrots when pizza and french fries will do?

In an effort many 9-year-olds will cheer, Congress wants pizza and french fries to stay on school lunch lines and is fighting the Obama administration's efforts to take [unhealthy foods](#) out of schools.

The final version of a spending bill released late Monday would unravel school lunch standards the Agriculture Department proposed earlier this year. These include limiting the use of potatoes on the lunch line, putting new restrictions on sodium and boosting the use of whole grains. The legislation would block or delay all of those efforts.

The bill also would allow tomato paste on pizzas to be counted as a vegetable, as it is now. USDA had wanted to only count a half-cup of tomato paste or more as a vegetable, and a serving of pizza has less than that.

Nutritionists say the whole effort is reminiscent of the Reagan administration's much-ridiculed attempt 30 years ago to classify ketchup as a vegetable to cut costs. This time around, food companies that produce frozen pizzas for schools, the salt industry and potato growers requested the changes and lobbied Congress.

[School meals](#) that are subsidized by the federal government must include a certain amount of vegetables, and USDA's proposal could have pushed pizza-makers and potato growers out of the school lunch business.

Piling on to the companies' opposition, some conservatives argue that the federal government shouldn't tell children what to eat. In a summary of the bill, Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee said the changes would "prevent overly burdensome and costly regulations and ...provide greater flexibility for local school districts to improve the [nutritional quality](#) of meals."

School districts have said some of the USDA proposals go too far and cost too much when budgets are extremely tight. Schools have long taken broad instructions from the government on what they can serve in the federally subsidized meals that are given free or at reduced price to low-income children. But some schools have balked at government attempts

to tell them exactly what foods they can't serve.

Reacting to that criticism, House Republicans had urged USDA to rewrite the standards in a bill passed in June. The Senate last month voted to block the potato limits in its version, with opposition to the restrictions led by potato-growing states. Neither version of the bill included the latest provisions on tomato paste, sodium or whole grains; House and Senate negotiators added those in the last two weeks as they put finishing touches on the legislation.

The school lunch proposal is based on 2009 recommendations by the Institute of Medicine, the health arm of the National Academy of Sciences. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said they are necessary to reduce childhood obesity and future health care costs.

USDA spokeswoman Courtney Rowe said Tuesday that the department will continue its efforts to make lunches healthier.

"While it's unfortunate that some members of Congress continue to put special interests ahead of the health of America's children, USDA remains committed to practical, science-based standards for school meals," she said in a statement.

Nutrition advocate Margo Wootan of the Center for Science in the Public Interest said Congress's proposed changes will keep schools from serving a wider array of vegetables. Children already get enough pizza and potatoes, she says. It also would slow efforts to make pizzas - a longtime standby on school lunch lines - healthier, with whole grain crusts and lower sodium levels.

"They are making sure that two of the biggest problems in the school lunch program, pizza and french fries, are untouched," she said.

A group of retired generals advocating for healthier school lunches also criticized the spending bill. The group, called Mission: Readiness, has called poor nutrition in school lunches a national security issue because obesity is the leading medical disqualifier for military service.

"We are outraged that Congress is seriously considering language that would effectively categorize pizza as a vegetable in the school lunch program," Amy Dawson Taggart, the director of the group, said in a letter to lawmakers before the final bill was released. "It doesn't take an advanced degree in nutrition to call this a national disgrace."

Specifically, the bill would:

- Block the [Agriculture Department](#) from limiting starchy vegetables, including corn and peas, to two servings a week. The rule was intended to cut down on [french fries](#), which many schools serve daily.
- Allow USDA to count two tablespoons of tomato paste as a vegetable, as it does now. The department had attempted to require that only a half-cup of tomato paste could be considered a vegetable. Federally subsidized lunches must have a certain number of vegetables to be served.
- Require further study on long-term sodium reduction requirements set forth by the USDA guidelines.
- Require USDA to define "whole grains" before they regulate them. The USDA rules require schools to use more [whole grains](#).

[Food companies](#) who have fought the USDA standards say they were too strict and neglected the nutrients that potatoes, other starchy vegetables and tomato paste do offer.

"This agreement ensures that nutrient-rich vegetables such as potatoes, corn and peas will remain part of a balanced, healthy diet in federally funded school meals and recognizes the significant amounts of potassium, fiber and vitamins A and C provided by tomato paste, ensuring that students may continue to enjoy healthy meals such as pizza and pasta," said Kraig Naasz, president of the American Frozen Food Institute.

The [school lunch](#) provisions are part of a final House-Senate compromise on a \$182 billion measure that would fund the day-to-day operations of the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Justice, Transportation and Housing and Urban Development. Both the House and the Senate are expected to vote on the bill this week and send it to President Barack Obama.

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