

January 4, 2024

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Chair  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Susan Collins  
Ranking  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Martin Heinrich  
Chair  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Hoeven  
Ranking  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kay Granger  
Chair  
House Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro  
Ranking  
House Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Andy Harris  
Chair  
House Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sanford Bishop Jr.  
Ranking  
House Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairs Murray, Heinrich, Granger, and Harris, and Ranking Members Collins, Hoeven, DeLauro, and Bishop:

As you finalize the fiscal year (FY) 2024 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies spending bill, the undersigned organizations urge you to oppose the rider that excludes cheese from the updated sodium reduction goals for school meals (Sec. 773 in the Senate; Sec. 766 in the House). This rider limits the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s ability to implement science-based sodium targets for school meals to protect and improve children's health.

Earlier this year, the USDA issued a proposed rule to strengthen nutrition standards consistent with the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans ("Child Nutrition Programs: Revisions to Meal Patterns Consistent With the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans"). The proposed rule would

reduce sodium by 20 percent in school breakfasts and 30 percent in school lunches through a series of two-year 10 percent reductions through 2030. The proposed sodium limits apply to an entire meal averaged over the course of the week, allowing schools to balance higher sodium meals with lower sodium meals throughout the week. That ensures that schools can still serve a saltier cheesy pizza or cheeseburger one day, and a not-so salty entrée the next, which already gives dairy companies the flexibility to sell schools anything from Swiss cheese (a lower sodium cheese) to feta (one of the saltiest cheeses).

These evidence-based updates to the sodium allowed in school meals are critical. Nine out of ten children in the U.S. consume too much sodium, which is linked to high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Currently, one in six children have raised blood pressure. A recent study modeling the impacts of strengthening school nutrition standards showed that updating the sodium limits has the largest potential health and economic benefits compared to any other nutritional change.<sup>1</sup>

The proposed rule is feasible both for schools and the food industry. The USDA considers challenges faced by school nutrition programs, including those attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, in aligning school meals with the Dietary Guidelines. The requirements are gradually phased in over multiple years and involve an additional \$100 million investment to help schools improve the nutritional quality of school meals. Many schools have already reduced sodium beyond USDA's requirements. Cheese manufacturers have already created and sell cheeses that would meet the goals in the proposed rule.<sup>2</sup> The proactive response from schools and industry is terrific progress since cheese is one of the top foods that contribute to excess sodium in children's diets.<sup>3</sup>

The cheese carveout rider requires the USDA to develop a special exemption for the sodium in cheese used for "food safety and functional purposes" from the overall meal standards. If the USDA does not include this exemption, the rider prevents the USDA from implementing the updated sodium limits in the proposed rule and either freezes current sodium reduction levels (Senate rider) or rolls back current sodium reduction levels to previous targets (House rider). The impact of this rider would halt sodium reduction entirely for all school foods until cheese gets special treatment. Further, if the amount of sodium that the USDA determines allowable for "food safety and functional purposes" is too high, schools could serve more cheese and more types of saltier cheeses, negating the purpose of overall sodium reduction in the meals program.

**In conclusion, we urge you to strike the rider that carves out cheese from the proposed sodium limits for school meals.**

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<sup>1</sup> Wang L, Cohen JF, Maroney M, Cudhea F, Hill A, Schwartz C, Lurie P, Mozaffarian D. Evaluation of health and economic effects of United States school meal standards consistent with the 2020-2025 dietary guidelines for Americans. *Am J Clin Nutr*; 2023 Sep;118(3):605-613.

<sup>2</sup> Land O Lakes. *Land O Lakes® Readi-Pac® Reduced Fat Swiss Cheese Slices*. n.d. <https://www.landolakesfoodservice.com/products/cheese/land-o-lakes-readi-pac-swiss-cheese-slices-reduced-fat/>. Accessed October 13, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> American Heart Association. *Sodium and Kids*. December 2, 2022. <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/sodium/sodium-and-kids>. Accessed October 13, 2023.

Sincerely,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Advocates for Better Children's Diets  
Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Inc  
American Heart Association  
Association of Black Cardiologists  
Association of State Public Health Nutritionists  
Balanced  
California Association of Food Banks  
Center for Digital Democracy  
Center for Science in the Public Interest  
Chef Ann Foundation  
Coalition for Healthy School Food  
Colorado Children's Campaign  
FARE (Food Allergy Research and Education)  
Friends of the Earth  
Healthy Food America  
Healthy School Food Maryland  
Healthy Schools Campaign  
Jump IN for Healthy Kids  
National Association of Chronic Disease Directors (NACDD)  
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners  
National Education Association  
National WIC Association  
Nebraska Appleseed  
North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition  
Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition  
NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene  
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine  
Public Health Institute  
Seventh Generation Interfaith Coalition for Responsible Investments  
Society of Behavioral Medicine  
The Praxis Project