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National WIC Association



## Statement Opposing Congressional Intervention in the WIC Food Packages

We are tremendously concerned about 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 bring to your attention a recent Dear Colleague letter circulated by Congressmen Walden and Meeks that urges USDA to include white potatoes in the WIC food package. The letter is an attempt to 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 have the potential to jeopardize WIC's effectiveness.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is regarded as one of the most successful of all federal programs with a 72% public approval rating.<sup>1</sup> 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.

### **Congress Should Not Interfere in the Scientific Process of Determining WIC Food Packages**

*In the 38 years since the WIC program began, Congress has never interfered with selecting which foods the WIC program should provide. Instead, Congress has delegated the determination of the WIC food packages to experts in the field of nutritional science and medicine. This exemplary track record and the program's grounding in science is being jeopardized by the white potato growers' effort to get Congress to urge USDA to provide white potatoes through WIC. The interests of potato growers should not be placed above the nutritional health and well-being of low-income mothers and children or the evidence-based integrity of the WIC food package. The public health community has strongly supported the restraint and good judgment displayed by Congress in insulating WIC from political pressures and focusing solely on promoting maternal and child health.*

<sup>1</sup> Melman Group, American Viewpoint, Bipartisan Public Opinion Poll, November 2011.

### **Experts Have Recommended Excluding White Potatoes from WIC Food Packages**

In an effort that took over seven years to complete, USDA undertook a 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 interim final regulations, published in December 2007, closely adhere to the IOM recommendations and are strongly supported by nutrition and health experts.

The Dear Colleague circulated by Representatives Walden and Meeks notes that the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) have increased the number of recommended cups of starchy vegetables from the 2005 DGA to bring the recommended starchy vegetable consumption to 26.8% of total vegetable consumption and suggests that the USDA update the WIC food package regulations to reflect the change. However, young children are already consuming more than the recommended amount of starchy vegetables and consume more potatoes than any other fruit or vegetable. The vegetable most frequently consumed by two- and three- year-olds in the U.S. is French fries/fried potatoes, amounting to 18.5% of all vegetable consumption, while the fifth most consumed vegetable is mashed/whipped potatoes at 7.7% of total vegetable consumption in our country.<sup>2</sup> When combined with other starchy vegetables, the total starchy vegetable consumption of American children amounts to 36.1% of total vegetable consumption, which is more than the recommended 26.8%.<sup>3</sup>

Representatives Walden and Meeks' Dear Colleague also asserts that WIC mothers are not consuming fresh white potatoes in amounts that would limit the consumption of other fruits and vegetables. This statement fails to recognize the consumption of potatoes in other forms, such as french fries and potato chips, which represent the largest proportion of potato consumption.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that WIC is a supplemental program, providing the key nutrients that nutrition scientists have determined are lacking in the diets of low-income families. The program 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.

Again, we urge you in the strongest possible terms to reject the effort to introduce political, non-science-based elements into the composition of WIC food packages. Congress should not intervene in the WIC food package process and contravene sound scientific expert recommendations. If we may provide further information, please contact Martelle Esposito with the National WIC Association at mesposito@nwica.org or 202.232.5492.

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<sup>2</sup> Fox MK, et al. (2010). Food Consumption Patterns of Young Preschoolers: Are They Starting Off on the Right Path? *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 110: S52-S59.

<sup>3</sup> Fox MK, et al. (2010). Food Consumption Patterns of Young Preschoolers: Are They Starting Off on the Right Path? *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 110: S52-S59.

<sup>4</sup> Economic Research Service—United States Department of Agriculture. (2011). ERS-USDA Briefing Room: Potatoes. < <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/potatoes/> > ; Fox MK, et al. (2010). Food Consumption Patterns of Young Preschoolers: Are They Starting Off on the Right Path? *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 110: S52-S59.