

Kansas Cattlemen Pleased to See Modifications

Before the start of the 2012-2013 school year, many parents learned that their child's school lunch would be modified to comply with a new USDA school lunch program. Under the new program regulations, school cafeterias are required to serve twice as many fruits and vegetables while limiting proteins and carbohydrates and the maximum calorie allocation has been limited for high school lunches between 750 and 850 calories. For elementary students, the calories are limited to 650. This has had a direct impact on U.S. cattle producers. Under federal law, beef provided for school lunches must be USA beef.

Across the country, parents, school teachers, and school children have spoken up against this new program. One outspoken group, parents, teachers and students from Wallace County High School (Sharon Springs, KS) addressed this issue at the KCA Convention last month. Beef provides several essential vitamins and minerals that help prevent chronic disease, and it's proven that the nutrients in beef are essential for healthy growth and development. Children who do not eat enough lean beef may be missing out on key nutrients such as iron and zinc. There are additional negative consequences to not getting enough lean beef. Students can be tired throughout the day. Athletes are not getting enough balanced nutrients to maintain their energy. Children are eating more food before and after school, and in some cases, children are going hungry. In some areas of the country, school breakfasts and lunches are the only balanced meals children eat. The new program, applying to both school breakfasts and lunches can hinder children's energy levels, ability to learn, and physical activity.

Through opposition and feedback from states, schools, parents, and legislators, USDA announced that it has moved to allow for additional flexibility in meeting some of the new standards.

"USDA Secretary Vilsack stated, "The top operational challenge that States and schools have reported is in serving meals that fit within the weekly minimum and maximum serving ranges for the grains and meat/meat alternate portions of the standards. To help schools make a successful transition to the new requirements, we have provided additional flexibility in meeting the requirements for these components. If a school is meeting just the minimum serving requirements for these two food groups, they will be considered in compliance with that portion of the standards, regardless of whether they have exceeded the maximum. This flexibility is being provided to allow more time for the development of products that fit within the new standards while granting schools additional weekly menu planning options to help ensure that children receive a wholesome, nutritious meal every day of the week."

KCA Executive Director, Brandy Carter responded, "This is a step in the right direction. Allowing more meat and grains is important. KCA has been working to improve this program and get more beef back into the schools. We have been on calls with USDA, with parents, teachers, and legislators. Congressman Huelskamp (R-KS) has also been an outspoken critic of this program, and his work has been appreciated as well. As USDA continues to move forward, KCA will continue to monitor this and be involved to protect our children and the U.S. producers who provide the healthy, safe and wholesome products our children need to grow and develop. At this point, it is important to get this information to the schools so that children can be provided with appropriate meals. KCA is working to do that now."