

Hot Potato Issue

The U.S. Senate is blocking a USDA proposal to limit spud servings in schools

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A Senate vote blocked the USDA from placing limits on the amount of vegetables served in schools, including the starchy potato.

Schools are still free to pass the potato. On Tuesday, the U.S. Senate voted to block a proposal by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that would have limited the amount of potatoes and other starchy vegetables served in schools. The USDA had wanted to make the changes to the federal school lunch program. It would have limited the amount of starchy vegetables to two servings per student per week, or about a cup. And those starchy veggies that are high in carbohydrates would also have been banned from school breakfasts. The limit aimed to reduce the amount of fried potatoes, such as french fries and tater tots, served in schools.



For now, schools can still serve tater tots to students after the U.S. Senate blocked a proposed potato limit.

The Senate blocked the USDA's proposal by amending, or changing, a spending bill that included funding for the department. The amendment blocks the USDA from putting any limits on the amount of servings of potatoes or other vegetables in school lunches. Senator Susan Collins of Maine, a spud-growing state,

sponsored the amendment. "[USDA's] proposed rule would have imposed significant and needless costs on our nation's school districts at a time when they can least afford it," Collins said.

Food Fight

Those in favor of a potato limit say that children get enough potatoes already and should be encouraged to try other vegetables. The group Center for Science in the Public Interest pushed for the restrictions. "USDA's proposal was about helping kids to eat a very wide variety of vegetables, and I think that point has been lost in all this," said the Center's Margo Wootan. "Other vegetables have a hard time competing with potatoes."

The proposed change upset potato growers, who believe potatoes were being unfairly targeted. Some schools have criticized the USDA's attempt to tell them exactly what foods they can or can't serve. Critics say the USDA should focus on advising schools on how to prepare the potato instead. Potatoes can be a good source of fiber and potassium. Many schools already prepare french fries with less grease and serve potatoes in healthier recipes.

The USDA is expected to release a final list of guidelines for the federal school lunch program next year. Senator Mark Udall of Colorado, another potato-growing state, also sponsored the amendment that blocked the spud limit. "This amendment seeks to ensure flexibility for schools to provide nutritious and affordable school meals," he said.