***Senate Saves the Potato on School Lunch Menus***

**By**[**ROBERT PEAR**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/robert-pear)OCT. 18, 2011

WASHINGTON — The Senate stood up Tuesday for the humble white potato and rebuffed an effort by President Obama [to limit its consumption](http://abcnews.go.com/US/usda-proposal-cuts-potatoes-schools/story?id=13621442) by millions of schoolchildren around the country.

The administration has proposed limiting the amount of potatoes and other starchy vegetables that can be served in school lunches to one cup per student per week, and banning them from school breakfasts.

The Senate on Tuesday moved to block the proposal by adopting an amendment to the 2012 spending bill for the Agriculture Department. The amendment, approved by unanimous consent, prohibits the department from setting “any maximum limits on the serving of vegetables in school meal programs.”

Senators Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, and Mark Udall, Democrat of Colorado, set aside partisan differences and defended the potato, which is grown in great quantities in their states. They said the proposal had no basis in nutrition science.

“The proposed rule would prevent schools from serving an ear of fresh corn one day and a baked potato another day of the same week, an utterly absurd result,” Ms. Collins said.

Mr. Udall said, “Anything can be fried or drowned in any number of fats available to us as consumers.” The problem, he said, is not with the potato, but with how it is sometimes prepared.

As [defined by the Agriculture Department](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Legislation/ProposedRule_ppt1-19-11.pdf), “starchy vegetables” include white potatoes, corn, green peas and lima beans. By limiting consumption of them, the department said, it hopes to “encourage students to try new vegetables in place of the familiar starchy ones.”

But Ms. Collins, who grew up amid the potato fields of northern Maine, said: “Potatoes have more potassium than bananas. They are cholesterol-free and low in fat and sodium and can be served in countless healthy ways.” At about a nickel per serving, she said, they are “a great nutritional bargain.”

“The department was well intended in trying to improve the nutritional quality of school meals,” Ms. Collins said, “but in this case it just missed and went too far.”

The [American Association of School Administrators](http://www.aasa.org/), representing thousands of local school officials, said the proposed standards were “overly prescriptive and limit school district flexibility in offering fruits and vegetables.”

The House criticized the proposal in a report accompanying its version of the spending bill.

On a separate issue, the Senate voted 99 to 0 on Tuesday to prevent the Justice Department from conducting gun-smuggling investigations using techniques like those in [Operation Fast and Furious](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/08/us/politics/eric-holder-lashes-out-over-gun-inquiry-comments.html). Federal agents in that investigation allowed people they suspected of being low-level buyers for a gun-trafficking network to obtain weapons, some of which were later used to commit crimes in Mexico and the United States.

Senator John Cornyn, Republican of Texas, said that “Operation Fast and Furious not only claimed the life of a Border Patrol agent,” but also jeopardized the United States’ relationship with Mexico.

Mr. Cornyn proposed the amendment adopted by the Senate, which says the government cannot transfer firearms to drug cartels unless federal agents “continuously monitor or control” the weapons at all times.