



November 23, 2011

Tomato Products in the National School Lunch Program

Many recent media stories have covered the issue of the new school lunch rule, reporting that now “pizza counts as a vegetable.” But the story is much more complex and merits clarification. In order to address the rising rates of childhood obesity, as well as public pressure to improve the healthiness of school lunches, the USDA proposed a new nutrition rule that they felt would promote more fruits and vegetables in the school lunch program. The proposed rule, which was recently blocked by a House and Senate compromise for the agriculture spending bill, would have affected how tomato products were credited in the school lunch program.

The proposed rule would have specifically changed the current practice of crediting tomato paste and puree. In the past, they were credited as a calculated volume based on their whole food equivalency using the percent of natural tomato soluble solids in paste and puree. Under the proposed rule, tomato paste and puree would have been credited as an actual volume served. In the past, the credit for tomato-based products like salsa or sauce was $\frac{1}{4}$ cup to equal one vegetable serving. Under the proposed rule, it would have increased by three-fold to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of sauce to equal one vegetable serving.

Therefore, if the menu included a tomato-based sauce such as spaghetti sauce, it would have been difficult to achieve even one serving of vegetables, considering that $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of sauce would be too large to portion on a single serving. In addition, adding tomato-based sauces to other dishes such as stew, soup, or casseroles would have made it increasingly difficult to meet the proposed requirement of vegetable servings. This calculation would essentially discourage the use of tomato products—a popular, delicious, nutritious vegetable specifically recommended within the 2010 Dietary Guidelines—in the school lunch program as a vegetable serving.

TPWC calculates that, because tomato products are cooked and concentrated, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of tomato-based sauce includes the equivalent of at least two whole tomatoes, which easily exceeds a serving of vegetables according to USDA standards. It is important to note that the school nutrition rule was not changed to promote leniency regarding tomato products—it simply remained consistent with the existing guidelines in the crediting of tomato products that have been used for years. Tomatoes are the most popular non-potato vegetable in the country, and they contain key nutrients such as vitamins C, A and K, potassium, fiber, and the important antioxidant lycopene, which is more readily available to the body in cooked form. Upholding the current crediting of tomato products in the school lunch program will further support the inclusion of this healthy, delicious vegetable in children’s diets.