

Senate passes Collins-Udall potato amendment

The Agriculture Department would not be able to limit the number of times per week that schools can serve potatoes and other starchy vegetables for the next year under an amendment proposed by Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, and Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo. and passed by the Senate by unanimous consent late today.

Collins and Udall sponsored the amendment to the fiscal year 2012 Agriculture appropriations bill in reaction to a rule USDA proposed earlier this year to limit servings of a certain category of vegetables to a total of one cup per week in the national school lunch program, and to ban this category of vegetables from school breakfasts. The group includes white potatoes, green peas, lima beans and corn.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine

Collins said she was “delighted” that the Senate had accepted the amendment. The National Potato Council, which had been lobbying hard against the rule, declared victory while nutrition advocates said politics had interfered with science, but expressed relief that Collins’s legislation was not broader.

“The USDA estimates that this rule could have cost as much as \$6.8 billion over five years,” Collins said. “The lion’s share of these costs would be incurred by the state and local agencies.”

“The lessons we should be teaching our kids is that it's not about any one vegetable; it's how you cook it,” Udall added. “This is a positive step forward, and I hope the USDA will now move forward quickly to implement the important child-nutrition legislation we passed last year.”

“Since publishing its proposed school meal changes in January, USDA has heard from tens of thousands of school districts, parents and taxpayers who are concerned about limiting healthy vegetable options for students, and the \$6.8 billion price tag of the regulation,” said John Keeling, executive vice president and CEO of the National Potato Council.

Margo Wootan, Center for Science in the Public Interest

But Margo Wootan of the Center for Science in the Public Interest said her group remained opposed to the congressional action because USDA’s Food, Nutrition and Consumer Service had followed the guidelines of the Institute of Medicine, which said that children get potatoes outside of school and need other types of vegetables that they are less likely to get at home.

The passage of the amendment “clearly shows that politics trumps science in Washington — not that that is surprising but it is always disappointing,” Wootan said.

But Wootan said the Collins amendment is preferable to report language in the House-passed fiscal year 2012 Agriculture appropriations bill, which advises USDA it should rewrite the entire rule. The House and Senate bills will have to be reconciled.

Jim Weill, Food Research and Action Center

Jim Weill of the Food Research and Action Center said he was relieved that the Collins amendment “does not generally screw up the regulatory process,” and that USDA officials should be allowed to write the interim final rule, which will also be subject to another round of public comment.

“The rule making process should be followed, we are confident in the end there should be a good rule,” Weill said in an interview.

USDA officials have said they are still assessing the 130,000 comments they received on the rule and will issue it in December. Lobbyists said that the final language in Collins’s amendment was the subject of negotiation among Collins, Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Herb Kohl, D-Wis., and Agriculture Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services Kevin Concannon.