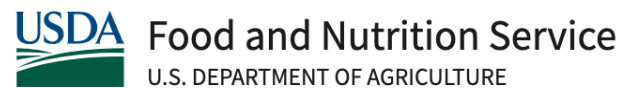




Takeaways From USDA's 2024

Final Rule On Child Nutrition
Programs Meal Patterns

USDA's Final Rule On Child Nutrition Programs Meal Patterns



On April 25, 2024, the USDA's Food and Nutrition Services released the final rule for "Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent With the 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans." This milestone marks another evolution of school meal standards, focusing on improving nutritional quality and promoting healthier eating habits among students nationwide. National Food Group and Zee Zees® are both committed to supporting school districts in these changes by providing better-for-you, tasty options for kids that meet regulations. Our K12 Registered Dietitian, Julie Wojciechowski, shared these top thoughts on the final rule shaping future meals for our next generation.

Added Sugar Limits

For the first time, added sugar limits will be established for yogurt, cereal and flavored milk in 2025, with Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) transitioning added sugar limits to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs). By 2027, added sugars will be limited to less than 10 percent of weekly calories in school breakfast and lunch programs to match the DGAs. Reducing added sugars in the diet ensures room for nutrients while maintaining flavorful menu options that students will enjoy. For example, swapping pancakes with syrup to pancakes and Zee Zees Fruit Cups reduces added sugars while providing vitamins and minerals that students will want to eat. Sugar also plays a vital role in food production, aiding in dough rising, structure, browning, moisture, and preservation. To benefit our K12 operators and kids, we're transitioning to Zee Zees No Added Sugar Applesauce! Balancing health benefits with taste and appearance is a gradual, complex process, but one we are committed to implementing for the benefit of our customers.

Sodium Reduction

Regulations will also lower weekly requirements for sodium in 2027 by 10 percent at breakfast and 15 percent at lunch programs through out the course of the week. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 9 in 10 children consume more sodium than recommended. Children who consume too much sodium, also have a higher risk factor for heart disease and stroke. Districts are working toward these limits by implementing more scratch cooking which may be a concern without adequate staff. Districts may need more commodity resources like our Zee Zees Applesauce, Fruit Cups, Hummus & Bean Dipz™ because of its natural sodium levels but USDA and K12 suppliers may also require infrastructure to keep up with volume needs. Industry must innovate to support these changes, ensuring technology can meet varying volume demands. While sodium adds flavor, extends shelf life, and maintains food safety, we are committed to providing tasty, compliant options for K12 students. All our current Zee Zees items meet new sodium requirements.

Plant Protein

An increased emphasis on offering a variety of plant proteins such as lentils, seeds, beans, and ethnic foods such as hummus are also a feature of the updated regulations. Nuts and seeds can credit for the full meat/meat alternate component, previously at 50 percent. More districts are featuring increased vegetarian options to align with children's diverse dietary preferences for health, religious, allergy, animal, and environmental needs. Zee Zees has a variety of plant proteins like shelf-stable hummus that makes it easier to meet these requests without refrigeration or extra labor, and helps districts include these options on menus to meet meal pattern requirements by ensuring that every child can enjoy nutritious, satisfying meals.

Buy American

The rule enhances the requirement to purchase domestic products through clearer definitions on exceptions, contractual obligations, and a new documentation requirement. Additionally, it introduces a phased approach to limit purchases of non-domestic foods starting in 2025. While promoting locally sourced ingredients may improve freshness and supports the benefit of consuming agriculture, it also necessitates careful menu planning and collaboration between suppliers, USDA, and school districts under these new regulations. All our Zee Zees products are currently compliant with some meeting the exception criteria, we're working with schools to simplify the documentation process, making it a breeze to stay compliant.

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Conclusion

USDA's key changes to the current standards aim to enhance nutrition in school meals by reducing added sugar and sodium, increasing meal variety, and clarifying domestic purchases, among other improvements. Consideration of timing for effective implementation of updated school meal standards is appreciated. These new standards will create new educational opportunities on healthy eating and create a space for stakeholders to collaborate on processes to best meet the needs of students. National Food Group and Zee Zees are both committed to providing schools solutions to implement these changes and provide students with appealing meal choices that support wellness and enhance food security.

References

- United States Department of Agriculture. "Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent With the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans." Final Rule. [<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-042524>]
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 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). "Reducing sodium in children's diets." Vital Signs. [<https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/pdf/2014-09-vitalsigns.pdf>]
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USDA has a vision to provide economic opportunity through innovation, helping rural America to thrive; to promote agriculture production that better nourishes Americans while also helping feed others throughout the world; and to preserve our Nation's natural resources through conservation, restored forests, improved watersheds, and healthy private working lands.

The USDA is made up of 29 agencies and offices with nearly 100,000 employees who serve the American people at more than 4,500 locations across the country and abroad.

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About National Food Group

Founded in 1990, National Food Group is one of America's fastest-growing wholesale foodservice manufacturers and distributors. National Food Group's family of brands includes Zee Zees® better-for-you snacks for kids of all ages, Elated Plates®, innovative food items ensuring a supreme sense of satisfaction with every bite, and Fare Promise® for truly square and deliciously nutritious meals at remarkably low prices.

National Food Group offers three core programs to help make budgets and planning easy: Always Available®, Opportunity Buys®, and Commodity Processing™. Our food experts can also develop original items to meet custom nutritional and pricing requirements. The company is headquartered in Novi, Michigan. For more information, visit nationalfoodgroup.com.

