

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 27, 2012

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
14th And Independence, NW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We request that as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) finalizes new regulations governing the supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), you seriously reconsider the ban on the purchase of fresh white potatoes, which is currently included in the proposed final rule. Excluding inexpensive, nutrient-dense fresh white potatoes from the WIC supplemental *nutrition* program—while all other fruits and vegetables are included—sends the wrong message to low-income WIC participating mothers and suggests a “government-knows-best” mentality inconsistent with individual choice and promotion of self-responsibility.

Ensuring that fresh white potatoes qualify for WIC will help your agency develop and implement a federal nutrition program that truly promotes the consumption of healthy fruits and vegetables by adults and children alike.

A scientific study on consumer choices among WIC participants using supplemental vouchers and published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association found that “low-income consumers make wise, varied, and nutritious choices from available produce and that the potential for dietary improvement with a targeted subsidy that allows free choice within the produce category is significant.”¹ Additionally, at 10 cents per ½ cup serving, boiled white potatoes are the cheapest fresh fruit or vegetable available, according to USDA’s Economic Research Service in 2011.²

In the past, the agency has commented that the proposed ban on fresh white potatoes was based on a 2005 National Academies’ Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, which considered the recommendations of the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA). However, since the agency’s announcement of the proposed rule, the 2010 DGA were published in January 2011 reflecting current data on nutritional needs and current consumption patterns.

As the federal government’s evidence-based nutritional guidance, the 2010 DGA recommends 5-6 cups of starchy vegetables per week for women with a daily caloric intake of 1,800-2,400 calories—an increase of 2-3 cups per week from the 2005 DGA.^{3 4} The 2010 DGA also recommends up to 4 cups of starchy vegetables per week for children up to age five with a recommended daily caloric intake of

¹ Herman, D.R., G.G. Harrison, and E. Jenks. 2006. “Choices Made by Low-Income Women Provided with an Economic Supplement for Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Purchase,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, Vol. 106: pp. 740-744.

² Stewart, H., J. Hyman, J.C. Buzby, E. Frazão, and A. Carlson. 2011. How Much Do Americans Pay for Fruits and Vegetables? USDA, Economic Research Service. www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/EIB71/EIB71.pdf. (May 29, 2012)

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010, Appendices 6 and 7*, page 78-79

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005, Appendix A-2*, page 53

up to 1,600 calories—an increase of 1.5 cups per week from the 2005 DGA. USDA should revisit its WIC regulations to reflect these most recent federal guidelines.

Nutritional data also support the value of white potatoes in providing key nutrients, including potassium, vitamin C, fiber, and folate to WIC mothers and their young children. For example, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) states that folate is necessary for the production and maintenance of new cells, which is especially important during pregnancy.⁵ According to USDA's Nutrient Data Laboratory, one medium (173 gram serving) white Russet potato contains 45 micrograms of folic acid, which is more than in similar servings of cooked carrots (24 micrograms) or sweet potatoes (10 micrograms), two other commonly consumed vegetables.⁶

Additionally, the agency has previously stated that including fresh white potatoes in the WIC program would hinder the goal of expanding the types and varieties of fruits and vegetables available to participants. However, the latest consumption data do not support the notion that WIC participants are over-consuming potatoes. According to publically available data from the Center for Disease Control's 2005-2008 *National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey* and an analysis from CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, women participating in the WIC program consumed only 2.1 percent of their total calories from fresh white potatoes while non-WIC participants took in 2.4 percent of their calories from fresh white potatoes. Although slight, this difference indicates that WIC participants are not currently over-consuming potatoes compared to their non-WIC peers. It also shows that neither group is consuming potatoes in amounts that limit the consumption of other fruits and vegetables in their diets.⁷

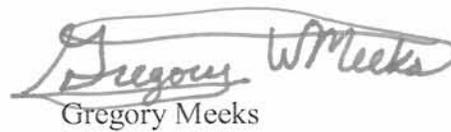
WIC participants and U.S. taxpayers deserve federal nutrition policy that is science-based and has the potential to improve the health of participants. Since potatoes are far less expensive than other vegetables per unit of nutrition delivered, WIC participants should be allowed to supply nutrients to themselves and their young children in a way that maximizes their WIC vouchers and the efficiency of federal expenditures.

We request that you carefully reconsider the decision to exclude fresh white potatoes and ensure that they are included in the final rule.

Best regards,



Greg Walden
Member of Congress



Gregory Meeks
Member of Congress

⁵ National Institutes of Health Office of Dietary Supplements, *Dietary Supplement Fact Sheet: Folate*, <http://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/folate/> (March 26, 2012)

⁶ USDA Nutrient Data Laboratory, *Basic Report: Nutrient data for 11356, Potatoes, Russet, flesh and skin, baked*, <http://ndb.nal.usda.gov/ndb/foods/show/3151> (March 26, 2012)

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey*, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhanes/about_nhanes.htm (March 26, 2012)



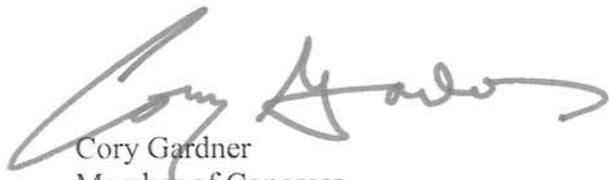
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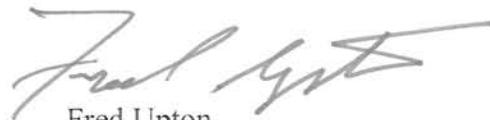
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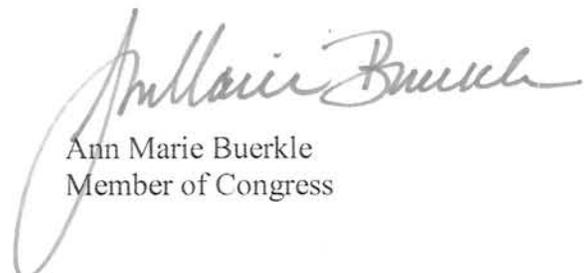
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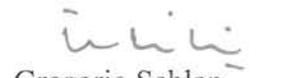


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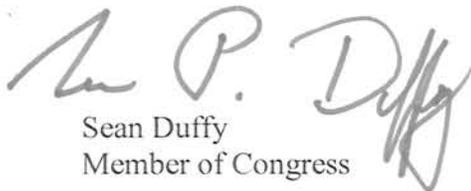
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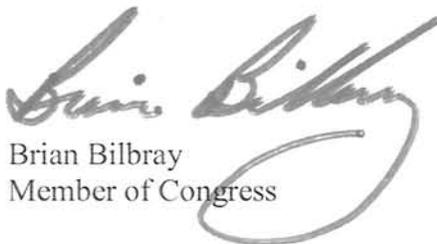
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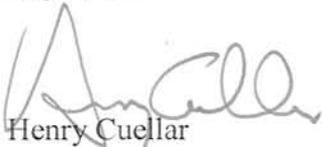
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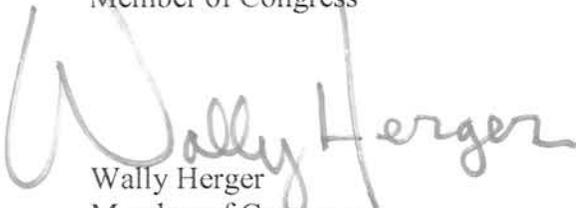
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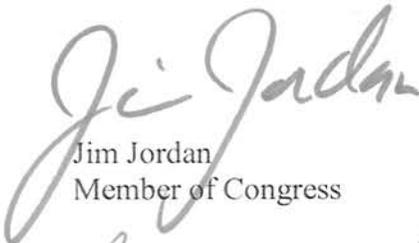
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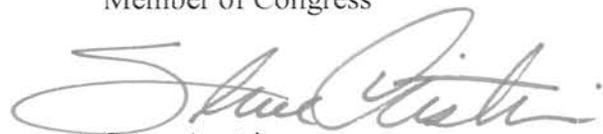
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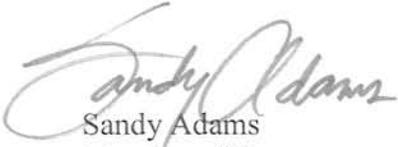
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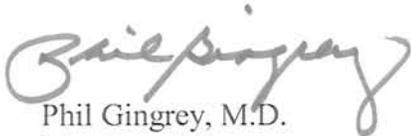
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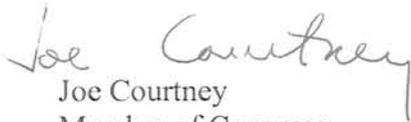
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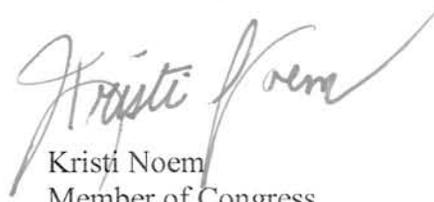
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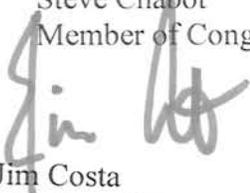
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