



Pennsylvania
Department of Agriculture

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research
RE: Keeping Kids Learning in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program

September 18, 2024

Submitted by:

Russell C. Redding

Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture

Representing: National Association of State Departments of Agriculture

Good afternoon, Chairman Fetterman and Ranking Member Braun, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today on an important and timely topic.

I. Introduction

My name is Russell Redding, and I am honored to serve as the Secretary of Agriculture for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA), a non-partisan, non-profit association that represents the elected and appointed commissioners, secretaries, and directors of the departments of agriculture in all fifty states and four U.S. territories. NASDA's mission is to grow and enhance American agriculture through policy advocacy, partnerships, and public engagement. I also previously served on the NASDA Board of Directors from 2020-2022.

State departments of agriculture are uniquely and crucially positioned at the intersection of agriculture and nutrition security. NASDA members, representing all types of agriculture across every corner of the U.S., come from a range of political backgrounds—reflecting our bipartisan nature and range of programs implemented in each of their states, including those focused on nutrition security, food safety, food system resiliency, agricultural innovation, and rural development.



Today, I also represent the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. Our sister agency, the Pennsylvania Department of Education administers the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) within our state, delivering healthy and nutritious meals to more than one-million students throughout more than 800 School Food Authorities (e.g., school districts, charter schools, private non-profit schools, and residential childcare institutions). Our department, however, plays a key role in advancing programs that create access to healthy foods, whether in a school meal setting delivering USDA Food commodities and local foods access through Farm to School programming, reaching WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) recipients and seniors through farmers market vouchers, or helping to move Pennsylvania products into the charitable food system. Our department proudly partners across state government and with the private sector to ensure equitable access to affordable food and promote market opportunities for Pennsylvania farmers and agribusinesses.

I would like to touch on three items as it relates to school food and nutrition. The first will be to provide our perspective on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service's Child Nutrition Programs; secondly to discuss the critical role that federal spending on nutrition programs as a marketplace driver for U.S. agriculture; and third to provide perspective on how state departments of agriculture are addressing the unique needs of their regions, particularly by sharing some of the successes we've seen in Pennsylvania as we meet these challenges locally.

Our approach to school nutrition, and food access and security, is shaped significantly by the events of the COVID-19 pandemic. We discovered, in an extremely critical way, the value of school meals and what it meant for so many children and parents to have a reliable and affordable source of nutrition. Many of us may have taken for granted, or not fully appreciated, how essential that source of nourishment was for students and families. Each state has responded to these challenges differently, tailoring solutions to fit their unique food systems and communities. Pennsylvania worked to set up feeding locations at schools and other community-based centers where children could access grab and go meals and worked with the charitable feeding network to establish drive-through distributions and other low-contact methods of emergency food distribution to ensure that students who suddenly found themselves out of school still had access to a nutritious breakfast and lunch.

The pandemic also shined a light into the fragile spots of our food system, revealing the urgent and critical need to strengthen and stabilize our agriculture industries, particularly small and



medium producers within our supply chain. Across all states, a key focus –in full collaboration with our federal partners - has been on reinforcing the supply chain and creating resiliency at every level. Strengthening our local and regional food systems and expanding processing capacity for Pennsylvania farmers and agribusinesses has been crucial to our agriculture and nutrition security.

It sometimes takes a crisis for us to fully understand what we value, and why we value it. That has especially been true for me as I look at the role that government can play to provide affordable food in schools, balance the nutritional needs of children, and simultaneously expand the domestic marketplace and economic opportunities for U.S.-grown foods and food companies.

II. Impacts of the FNS (Food and Nutrition Service) Final Rule on Child Nutrition

We appreciate the thought and care that USDA has put into their Final Rule on Child Nutrition Programs and the balance between providing food that children will enjoy eating, while also acknowledging the role that school meals must play in providing balanced nutrition.

We appreciate the inclusion of yogurt and low-fat and flavored milk in the school meal setting. Both are wholesome products that provide essential nutrients for young children. We recognize, however, that the low-sugar requirements for yogurt may be an early barrier for schools to source, especially as these products are typically more expensive. School milk is often an important entry point for students to develop lifelong habits around dairy consumption and supply children with vitamins and minerals needed for healthy development, so the continued ability to offer flavored milk is welcomed.

We also believe that students will benefit from the ability for schools to offer protein-rich foods in the school breakfast setting, like eggs and yogurt. Pennsylvania is a nation-leading dairy producing state, and the most recent U.S. Census of Agriculture reported significant growth in the past five years in poultry, driven in large part by egg production. Across the U.S., farmers and food companies are well positioned to take advantage of these local and regional market opportunities that school meals provide, especially with the flexibility of providing protein-rich foods at breakfast.

I also want to commend the USDA's rule for its strong emphasis on "local" foods and a reduction in non-domestic purchases. While this may result in some limitations on the varieties of foods that schools can serve, it will provide greater opportunities for U.S. companies to tailor



their product lines for school settings and encourage greater connections between the school cafeteria and local farmers. Adding provisions to allow local sourcing in school food contracting procurement will send a strong signal to the marketplace, giving farmers and agribusinesses greater opportunities to make direct and consistent connections with schools. Given our state's strong history of food manufacturing, both on the regional and national scale, I feel confident that Pennsylvania agriculture stands to benefit from these new rules. However, this looks different in every corner of the country, as each state and region has its own food systems, unique challenges, and opportunities. Supporting state agencies and their ability to address these flexibilities, diverse food systems, and population needs is essential for the success of these initiatives across the U.S.

III. Successes and Challenges in Farm to School Programs

In a rich agricultural state like Pennsylvania, especially one with a significant diversity in what our farmers produce, creating greater connections between school meals and Pennsylvania products has been a key emphasis. In 2019, as part of the Pennsylvania Farm Bill, the only state-level Farm Bill in the nation, the PA Department of Agriculture launched a "Farm to School" grant program that built off the success of the Pennsylvania Farm to School network. This grant program provides a vehicle for school districts to increase local food procurement and launch training programs that help students connect their meals and the farmers who produce it.

We have found the success of this program is often coming in areas identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as food deserts. Grant programs like Farm to School can play a role in addressing those needs by equipping and empowering schools to create school gardens that can feed the cafeteria or find ways to adjust the school menu to reflect what is in season around Pennsylvania. For instance, the Erie City School District has used state and federal dollars to build out school gardens and host cooking programs for students to understand the types of meals that can be made from the products they have grown. City schools have also adjusted their menu to reflect the seasonality of locally produced products. These changes mean that students are receiving fresh, nutritionally dense meals, while also understanding the critical role that agriculture plays in their lives.

Across Pennsylvania, farmers are finding success partnering directly with food service directors on special events, such as serving locally grown sweet corn, or coming into long-term contracts to serve school meals. That is why we are enthusiastic about USDA's emphasis on domestic food production.



IV. Ongoing Needs for Operators and Districts

However, we do acknowledge that districts will face challenges at implementation, especially those districts that serve a high-volume of meals daily, or our rural districts that face logistical challenges in sourcing and delivery. We appreciate the USDA taking a phased in approach that will allow districts to find additional procurement options.

Programs like the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program, or LFPA, and the Local Food for Schools Program, or LFS, are two important tools for the USDA to utilize to help school districts increase their utilization of domestic, and local, foods. Moving forward, it is important for USDA to continue to build out program support for farmers, or commodities, in times of surplus crops, with regional flexibility to meet local needs.

For example, many school districts have storage or food preparation space challenges that limit the number of fresh products they can service. Others lack the kitchen equipment necessary to prepare healthy meals produced using local ingredients. Greater financial assistance in evolving those systems will go a long way to making fresh and healthy foods available to students. With that infrastructure support also comes the need for technical assistance for school nutrition staff to work through the challenges around procurement and preparation. Programs like the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program and Farm to School at the federal level provide important financing and leveraging options for schools, including the ability to use those dollars for domestic sourcing. Providing a consistent marketplace for these local and regional food sources also ensures that fresh US produce does not go to waste.

In a state with a significant rural population, we also want to highlight the unique challenges that our rural districts face as they try to meet these standards, while providing high-quality affordable meals for students. Increased funding for infrastructure, and technical service training is a step in the right direction, however, funding alone cannot solve every problem. As the USDA implements these new rules, we encourage the USDA to be flexible and recognize the specific needs and constraints of rural schools, especially across the country. With the full support of state and federal partners, we feel that schools can work through these challenges. I can confirm that NASDA members are at the table and ready to support these initiatives to connect our regional food systems with nutrition security.

V. School Meals as a Marketplace Driver



USDA purchased foods, including those for NSLP, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and other child and summer feeding programs, create marketplace and even new opportunities for farmers and food companies.

Pennsylvania ranks third in the nation for the source of commodity foods purchased by USDA for programs like the National School Lunch Program. During the last fiscal year that data was available, USDA purchased more than 192 million pounds of food with a value of more than \$276.2 million from Pennsylvania companies. Two major sources of food purchases for Pennsylvania products were protein and dairy, both fundamental building blocks of healthy school lunches. Pennsylvania is also a specialty crop producer, so we see ample opportunity for a number of fresh fruits and vegetables to make it into school meals. It is worth noting that over 200 specialty crops are produced across our country, showcasing the diverse and valuable, yet unique agricultural contributions each state brings to their region and child nutrition programs.

We have numerous food producers in Pennsylvania that find direct benefit from working with USDA on food procurement, including several that provide fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and eggs. Several of them meet the federal definition of a small business. Ultimately, the ability to send products to USDA for food procurement provides marketplace diversity for these businesses and gives farmers another outlet to market their products—a move that creates resiliency in their business plans.

Agricultural producers, the rural economy and communities of every size rely upon a forward-looking Farm Bill. The Farm Bill must provide farmers and ranchers with a reliable safety net. The Farm Bill must provide consumers access to the safest and most affordable food supply. The next Farm Bill must remain unified – securing a commitment to American agriculture and the critical food and nutritional assistance programs for those who need it most. The Farm Bill is an issue of national security.

VI. State Support for Schools and Food Access

As I stated earlier, we learned the critical value of school meals for children during the early days of the pandemic, when schools were closed and many students lost access to affordable, nutritious meals provided through these programs. We also witnessed the importance of a stable supply chain as we saw empty grocery store shelves across the county.



Across the nation, NASDA members have responded to these challenges, aiming to enhance our food system resilience. In Pennsylvania, for instance, we have seen producers take advantage of meat and poultry processing grants and intermediate lending programs to expand processing options. In our commonwealth, we have seen producers take advantage of meat and poultry processing grants and intermediate lending programs that create additional processing options. Pennsylvania was one of many states that received grant funding through the federal Resilient Food System Infrastructure Grant Program, or RFSI, to assist food processors that seek to add new products or processing systems. It should come as no surprise that grant requests are outpacing funding available. NASDA members have seen high demand for these grants, confirming producers across the U.S. see opportunities in the domestic market and are interested in reducing the number of links in the supply chain from farm to consumer. Many of my examples are from Pennsylvania, as you would expect, but these examples are found across the US, and demonstrate a trend that is reflected nationwide, highlighting the collective efforts across states to build a more resilient and efficient food system.

VII. Closing

We see a direct link as well between the steps the USDA is taking in this final rule that prioritizes local and domestic sourcing for school meals. It is important that we look back at the lessons learned from the pandemic and use them to shape our regulatory and policy work at both the state and federal level. School meals are vital, and to the greatest extent possible, those food items should come from U.S. producers, and hopefully, procured from local farmers and processors.

State departments of agriculture are unique, representing diverse regions from the furthest corners of our country. Yet, we come together as a unified body within NASDA, dedicated daily to supporting farmers and ranchers in every pocket of the U.S. and working to connect the food they grow with those who need it. Each of us face distinct challenges and opportunities, and as NASDA members are committed to linking regional food systems with nutrition security to address these needs comprehensively.

In conclusion, the Child Nutrition programs represent a significant advancement in our collective efforts to provide delicious and nutrient-dense meals to our children. By emphasizing local foods and reducing non-domestic purchases, we are promoting better health outcomes for students while also supporting our local agricultural economies. However, it is imperative that we continue to address the challenges faced by school meal program operators and



districts, as well as growers, and regional supply chains needs to fully advocate and strengthen this connection between agriculture and nutrition. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to working with the committee and my colleagues at the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture to ensure the continued success of the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs and to address any ongoing challenges.