

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

March 1, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your ongoing work to address nutrition insecurity and improve access to nutritious foods as a means to enhance long-term health outcomes, including through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). As one of the largest food assistance programs in the country, with the strongest nutrition standards across federal programs, WIC is a proven and effective nutrition intervention that improves dietary and health outcomes for 6.1 million pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to age 5.

To further increase WIC participants' access to healthy foods, we urge the Department to take swift action to issue the proposed rule, *Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children: Revisions in the WIC Food Packages*, in order to issue revised WIC food packages that build on the recommendations by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). We are disappointed that the proposed rule has now been delayed twice from projected publication dates in August and December 2021.

The last review of the WIC food packages occurred in 2009 and significantly shifted the available WIC foods to align with food patterns in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs). The 2009 revisions introduced fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to the WIC food packages, resulting in improved dietary quality and variety, especially for children. Healthier options provided through WIC resulted in improved health outcomes, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) measuring an overall reduction in childhood obesity among WIC-enrolled toddlers after the 2009 food package revisions. We believe that the upcoming proposed rule, if based on the NASEM recommendations, will make additional significant improvements for our nation's vulnerable women and children.

As required under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the WIC food packages were reviewed by an independent expert panel of NASEM, which issued its final report in 2017. USDA took the positive step to ensure that the 2020-2025 DGAs are largely consistent with the NASEM's recommendations. However, the NASEM panel was charged by USDA to develop cost-neutral recommendations. In their report, NASEM noted that funding constraints particularly limited their ability to recommend amounts of fruits, vegetables, and seafood at levels that would best align WIC participants' diet patterns with the best science and the recommendations of organizations such as the World Health Organization.

We note that in recent years, the current food package regulations limited WIC beneficiaries from purchasing foods in the amounts and variety anticipated by the appropriations provided for the program. In the fiscal year 2021 omnibus legislation, for example, \$1.25 billion in unspent fiscal year 2020 food funding was returned to the Treasury.

For these reasons, we therefore urge USDA to promulgate a regulation that includes the issuance of benefits that will incorporate fruits, vegetables, and lower-mercury seafood at amounts above NASEM's cost-neutral recommendations in a manner consistent with the scientific basis of NASEM's review.

Specifically, we urge you to ensure that the new proposed rule includes: increased fruit and vegetable benefits; increased lower-mercury seafood options as a distinct food category across child and adult food packages on a monthly basis without a rotating substitution with legumes and peanut butter; additional package size options, particularly for yogurt and grains; an additional substitution pattern, including the option for parents to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables in place of jarred infant foods to promote greater choice for parents; and stronger standards for whole grains, sugar content, calcium, and protein so that WIC-approved foods support WIC families in reaching DGA-recommended diet patterns.

With food prices rising, many families are more reliant than ever on WIC and other federal nutrition programs to put healthy food on the table. More children are benefitting from WIC, with a 7.5 percent national increase in child participation since the beginning of the pandemic. The comprehensive 2017 NASEM report is a strong foundation for additional steps that USDA can take to enhance the nutritional value of WIC food packages by increasing regular access to healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, and lower-mercury fish to promote diet patterns that are even further aligned with NASEM's recommendations and the DGAs.

We urge USDA to act expeditiously to promulgate a proposed rule that will enhance the health of low-income women and children. We appreciate your timely attention to our request.

Sincerely,



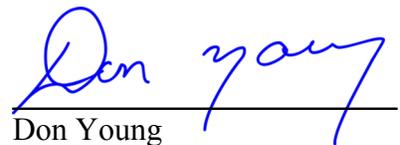
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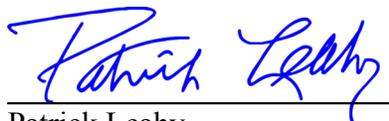
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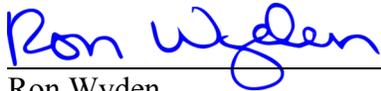
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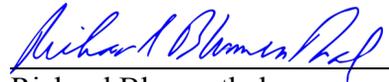
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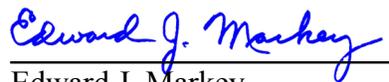
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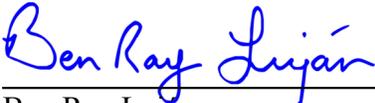
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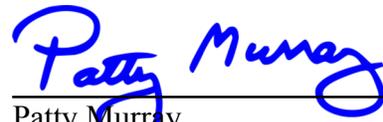
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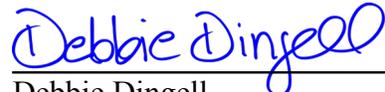
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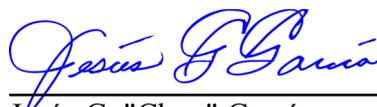
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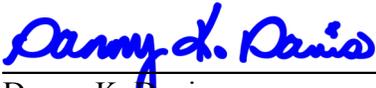
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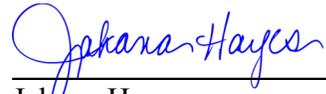
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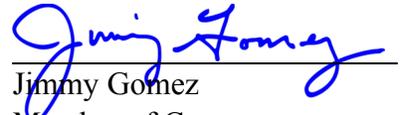
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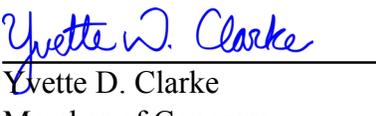
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Attachments: ASMI WIC Letter and National Fisheries Institute WIC
Seafood Letter