



## **Dietician Dahlkemper announces initiatives to improve USDA school meal programs**

**By Stewart Doan**

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Washington, Feb. 10 – A freshman congresswoman from Pennsylvania has announced several new initiatives to assure the safety and quality of food purchased by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for the National School Lunch Program and other food and nutrition assistance programs.

“One of the most direct ways we can provide for kids is to offer them safe and nutritious meals in school every day. Healthy children do better in school and are more likely to grow to be healthy, productive adults,” said Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper (D-PA), a member of the House Agriculture Committee and the first dietician elected to Congress. “We must do everything we can to ensure that our kids are being served safe, high quality foods at school.”

The initiatives are a combined effort of five USDA agencies—the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). The agencies will work together to improve communication at the federal and state levels, enhance safety standards, and ensure compliance, Dahlkemper said..

She announced the following initiatives by these agencies:

- AMS will implement new food safety purchasing requirements for its beef suppliers as a result of a review of the beef purchase program conducted by FSIS and ARS. AMS will continue its zero tolerance for Salmonella and E. coli O157:H7 for its products and will continue to use onsite meat acceptance specialists and other control measures.
- ARS and FSIS will provide technical assistance to AMS for School Lunch and other Federal nutrition assistance programs.
- In addition to the reviews by FSIS and ARS, AMS has asked the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to review the ground beef purchasing program. By the summer, NAS will conduct a thorough evaluation of the scientific validity of the current AMS technical requirements. This review will include benchmarking AMS vendor requirements against recognized industry leading programs that

- supply product directly to consumers.
- AMS will increase information sharing with other agencies in order to better monitor vendor performance and identify potential food safety issues in the process. Information on in-plant enforcement actions, positive pathogen test results, contract suspensions, recall notifications, and more will be better shared between USDA agencies.
  - FSIS will work with AMS to review and evaluate meat, poultry, and processed egg vendors as part of the AMS vendor eligibility process.
  - FNS will review and evaluate methods currently being used by state agencies to communicate with schools and school districts regarding product recalls. FNS will develop performance criteria for states that allow them to provide rapid communication to schools and school districts. FNS will provide financial assistance to states to allow them to upgrade the speed and accuracy of their food safety messages.
  - FNS will also establish a Center of Excellence devoted to research on school food safety issues in FNS child nutrition programs. Research is needed in areas such as produce safety, proper cooling practices, evaluation of in-school food safety programs, and the containment of norovirus, which is the leading cause of foodborne illness in schools.
  - FSA is evaluating and strengthening current requirements and will amend those requirements to better reflect compliance with Good Manufacturing Practices and use of a verified Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points program. FSA will ensure that commercial suppliers are able to provide a qualified level of food safety assurance for USDA programs.

According to Dahlkemper, these changes and continuous reviews will ensure that the food USDA distributes to school children and others meets the highest quality and safety standards

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