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Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor

Darrel J. Aubertine
Commissioner

March 6, 2013

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I am writing to you with respect to USDA's plans to work collaboratively with one or more states to increase student access to strained Greek yogurt through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. On behalf of Governor Cuomo and New York State, I would like to express our strong desire to participate in such a pilot program. With the proven leadership of Governor Cuomo, our schools, yogurt manufacturers, and government agencies are ready, willing and able to assist you in running a healthy and affordable pilot program that could serve as a model for other states to emulate.

The production of strained Greek yogurt continues to be an enormous success story in New York, with the most recent $206 million Mueller-Quaker yogurt plant deal Governor Cuomo successfully engineered in 2012. In the last five years, New York's yogurt plants have more than doubled in number and production. Over the same time period, the amount of milk used to make yogurt in New York increased dramatically from 158 million pounds to about 1.2 billion pounds. In 2012 New York plants produced 553 million pounds of yogurt and in 2013 this number is projected to increase to 692 million pounds. Most of the increase in yogurt production is attributable to the introduction and production of strained Greek yogurt as well as a recently improved dairy business climate spearheaded by Governor Cuomo.

New York is leading the nation in the production of strained Greek yogurt with plants such as Chobani, Fage, Alpina and Mueller-Quaker calling our State home. Recognizing this tremendous success and potential for continued exponential growth, Governor Cuomo convened a Yogurt Summit this past summer to bring industry leaders, academia and government together to explore ways to continue this success. As an outcome of the Yogurt Summit, Governor Cuomo recently announced two new initiatives aimed at increasing milk production while lowering cost for dairy farmers in New York.

Through our State Food Policy Council and our Farm to School Program we have the expertise and capacity to run a world class pilot program to demonstrate the benefits of including strained Greek yogurt as a healthy, cost effective food entitlement for school lunches. I applaud USDA's efforts to make available this highly nutritious food to more school children. Strained Greek yogurt offers greater nutritional benefits than unstrained yogurt with less sugar, carbohydrates, sodium and lactose, as well as an increase in protein per ounce. This pilot program is one step in the right direction for recognizing these nutritional differences.

Because Greek yogurt provides twice the protein than unstrained yogurt provides, I respectfully urge USDA as part of this pilot program to recognize its higher protein content by amending its crediting standards. Crediting strained Greek yogurt on a basis where 4 ounces is credited as two meat/meat alternates (M/MA) as opposed to one M/MA like unstrained yogurt will empower schools to fulfill child nutrition program requirements while enhancing the stewardship of scarce budget resources. Strained Greek yogurt provides more protein for less cost than unstrained yogurt. It follows that schools offering strained Greek yogurt – if credited for its higher protein content – could achieve savings ranging from $.02-$.20 per 4 ounce cup.

There are many ways schools will be able to save money if strained Greek yogurt is credited for its protein content. Improving available quantities of strained Greek yogurt in school meals will allow schools to more affordably offer a meat alternate to vegetarians and culturally diverse groups. A veggie patty, for example, can cost $.75 - $.85. By offering a 4 ounce cup of strained Greek yogurt, which would provide the same 2 M/MA content as a veggie patty, schools could achieve savings of $.35-$.45 per serving.

In closing, I would like to stress the important work USDA has started on updating the Commercial Item Description for Yogurt. USDA should include within the Commercial Item Description a definition of strained Greek yogurt reflecting its processing requirements and nutritional content, consistent with the goal of educating students about the nutrition choices they face in their lives for years to come.

Please keep us apprised of your work in selecting a state(s) for this important pilot project and do not hesitate to contact me for any assistance I can provide in your deliberations. Thank you for your time and consideration in the matter. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Darrel J. Aubertine
Commissioner