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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, Members of the Committee, my name is Ken Hecht, I am with California Food Policy Advocates, a nonprofit, statewide nutrition policy and advocacy organization. CFPA works to improve the health and well-being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious, affordable food. We give high priority to strengthening and expanding participation in the federal nutrition programs in light of their scope and size. I deeply appreciate the chance to speak on behalf of many California nutrition advocates and the broader community of Californians concerned about our youngsters' nutrition, health and academic opportunity.

I want to start by talking about research we currently are completing on federal commodities and their impact upon the nutrition quality of school meals. We are doing the research, which is sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, together with Samuels & Associates, a nutrition research and evaluation firm with years of experience studying school nutrition.

Federal commodities are extremely important. Amounting to about \$1 billion per year, commodity foods constitute nearly one-fifth of the food – and influence selection of the other food items -- in the lunch that 30 million school children consume each school day. School lunch supplies about one-third of a student's recommended daily allowances (RDAs), and school breakfast furnishes one-fourth the RDAs: together this is more than

half the nutrition a child receives in a day -- 180 days per year for 13 years of school. The food represents nourishment, and it also teaches children about healthy eating, in the same way that schools use their authority and trust to teach math and language skills. In these two ways, commodities, as the backbone of school meals, are important to children, but commodities also are indispensable to schools, making it possible for them to operate their cafeterias financially in the black.

Since the mid-1990's USDA has made impressive changes to commodities. The common belief that commodities are merely a device by which USDA relieves growers of unhealthy food and foists it off on school children is nothing more than an urban myth. Over the years, USDA gradually has improved the nutrition quality of commodities: it has eliminated food items high in fat and sodium and sugar; it has added healthy items -- whole grain items, for example, and developed a small but promising program to bring fresh fruit and vegetables to schools. And numerous items have been retained while their nutrition quality has improved: for example, ground beef is leaner, more cheese is low fat, canned fruit and vegetables contain less sugar and sodium. Recent communications with USDA underline the agency's continuing commitment to offer school districts food that is responsive to obesity prevention.

Still, there are numerous opportunities to strengthen the commodities program's capacity to prevent obesity and food insecurity. Given that one-third of California's children are in the grip of the obesity epidemic, improving the nutrition in school meals is an imperative. The recent results of USDA's School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment (SNDA) III confirm that most school meals fail to meet the current standards for fat, saturated fat and sodium, elements with ominous consequences for obesity.

The most obvious step should be to expand consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. They are at the top of every nutritionist's obesity-prevention list. USDA should help school districts develop more refrigeration and frozen storage and cover other one-time-only costs in connection with serving much more fresh produce. The supply of fresh produce should be vastly expanded, as well. If the very popular but small Department of

Defense Fresh program is withdrawn, as we have been told it might be, a good replacement should be developed quickly, and the commodity entitlement dedicated to fresh produce should be expanded, too. One way to do this would be to provide school districts with a commodity entitlement based upon breakfast participation, in addition to lunch participation, and to direct the new entitlement credit to fresh produce in the School Breakfast Program. California has just completed an amazingly successful pilot program, providing 10 cents of state reimbursement to school districts for every additional serving of fruit in the breakfast program, but like most states, California is facing huge budget deficits and potential cuts to all its education spending. Federal funds may be indispensable to carry this proven winner forward.

We were surprised to discover that over 50 percent of USDA commodity foods are directed to manufacturers for further processing before being delivered to school districts. USDA, in some cases, and California Department of Education, in the others, does monitor the processors to ensure that the entitlement value in the commodity that goes in to a processor come out to a school district. But it is our understanding that there is no responsibility on the state or federal agency to regulate or even to influence the nutrition quality of the processing, and no governmental agency does so. In some cases, USDA-purchased products are sent to processors where the foods take on fat, sodium and sugar that are counterproductive to the students' health. Considerations of nutrition quality, then, as well as food safety, may argue for greater oversight of what goes on in commodity processing. We urge this Committee to consider how it might strengthen this major, but un-scrutinized link in the food chain.

Perhaps the most disturbing finding from our study is that, regardless of what commodity foods USDA now offers, the districts in California persist in spending more than 4 out of 5 of their entitlement dollars on meat and cheese – items high in saturated fat and high in calories. Fruit and vegetables amount to just 13 percent, and a good chunk of that was potatoes. Because commodities tend to be the first foods ordered by school districts when assembling their menus, the pattern described above means that school meals will

continue to be meat- and cheese-centric, perpetuating the kinds of diets that are contributing to the overweight and obesity that our youngsters now confront.

What prevents this paradigm from shifting? Most of all, it is the commandment that school food directors receive from their school board – do not lose a penny. This insistence that food service stay in the black means that revenues must be high. This requires that participation be high, and this in turn depends on the appeal of the food. In most cases, schools cater to the students' perceived preference for fast food, which then gets imported into the school and sanctified by its presence there – if the school serves it, it must be good for us. What are the ways out of this difficult and destructive bind?

First and foremost, of course, is the insufficiency of the reimbursement. Healthy foods cost more to purchase, store, prepare, monitor and assess. The school food directors we know, if provided adequate reimbursement, would jump at the chance to turn out the healthiest meals. A second strategy is to provide financial incentives – a rebate, if you will – to schools to spend more of their entitlement dollars on fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grains and other healthy foods. Third, there should be support for training: school food staff need to understand the nutrition crisis and learn how to help turn it around. USDA regional staff and state agency staff have lost funding over the years so that they are unable to provide leadership, training and monitoring to ensure good nutrition quality. Not least, USDA meal nutrition standards should be aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans on an accelerated schedule; interim steps, as outlined in USDA's memorandum dated December 17, 2007, should be vigorously promoted, and monitoring of lunch and breakfast should be broader and more frequent.

California has played a leadership role in improving the nutrition standards in competitive foods. These, as you know, are all the foods sold on school campuses in competition with the USDA reimbursable meals. Even with the tighter standards, however, there are glaring problems – the first example that comes to mind is sports drinks, laced with calories and unnecessary so long as free, fresh water is available. The far better solution, as The New York Times noted on Sunday, is to do what Los Angeles

Unified School District has done – cut out competitive foods altogether. This strengthens the lunch program and eliminates the stigma that arises when kids who can, buy a la carte items and the kids who can't are segregated in the USDA-meal line.

Having said all this, I want to emphasize that recent studies, like SNDA III, continue to make the case that school meals, while not everything they should be, are better nutritionally than others and that school meals have been shown to improve students' nutrition and health, contribute to better attendance and attention, and help students achieve better academic performance. It is an overriding imperative to work toward more meals, as well as better meals, for more students. How can this be done? Ideally, with meals that are universally free, so that all children, regardless of family background, will participate free of stigma. But it also will increase participation substantially to eliminate the vagaries of paper applications for free and reduced-price school meals. These pieces of paper are so often lost, mislaid, forgotten, or simply filled in wrong by parents, that free and reduced-price certification should not depend upon them. Paper applications for free and reduced-price meals are anachronistic and counterproductive; area eligibility, based upon the census or other readily available demographic measures, would improve accuracy and better target the neediest children for the essential nutrition that school meals can provide.

There are other promising ideas, too, to increase participation in school meals. Closed campuses, with cafeterias serving the reimbursable meal and minimizing a la carte items, would boost participation in school lunch at the same time that it contributes to better academic achievement and student safety. Breakfast in the classroom, second chance breakfast and other opportunities to eat after the bell, when and where students are more likely to eat – all are proven methods for improving nutrition and academics. School meals, like other school activities, are wonderful opportunities for learning. They are too good to ignore.