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**REPORTS SHOW FEDERAL COMMODITY FOOD PROGRAM COULD DO MUCH MORE TO IMPROVE NUTRITIONAL QUALITY OF SCHOOL MEALS**

*Federal government provides \$1 billion in commodity foods, schools order mostly high-fat foods*

Washington, D.C. (Tuesday, September 9, 2008)—According to two new reports issued today, school districts fail to take advantage of the healthier foods offered by the federal nutrition commodity program, despite improvements made by the program to provide schools with more nutritious options. The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) report looked at various decision points—from the U.S. Department of Agriculture through state agencies, school districts and corporate distributors and processors—and identified numerous opportunities for schools to purchase commodity food products that are healthier for students. California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) looked intensively at the results in California schools and found that schools are ordering foods through the commodity program that are mostly high in fat and adversely impact the nutrition profiles of commodity foods – and the school meals – served to students.

The CFPA report, *The Impact of the Federal Child Nutrition Commodity Program on the Nutritional Quality of School Meals*, which was done in conjunction with Samuels & Associates, presents a comprehensive analysis of the current state of the federal commodity food program. The report finds that meat and cheese products accounted for more than 82 percent of commodity foods ordered by California school districts, while only 13 percent of the funds were spent on fruits, vegetables and legumes. The report also shows that nationally, more than 50 percent of commodity foods are sent to processors before they are delivered to schools. Processing often involves adding fat, sugar and sodium to commodity products, and as a result, many of the commodity foods have about the same nutritional value as junk foods by the time they reach students.

The FRAC analysis, *Commodity Foods and the Nutritional Quality of the National School Lunch Program*, examines the operations of the school lunch commodity program; identifies barriers to improving the nutritional quality of commodity-derived foods offered as part of school nutrition programs; and provides extensive recommendations on positive nutritional strategies to implement at critical control points in the system.

“We were impressed with the USDA’s efforts to offer healthier items through the federal commodities program,” said Ken Hecht, executive director of CFPA. “Yet the benefits of these healthy changes are being lost because school districts continue to order mainly high-fat items—and many of the healthier commodity foods are tainted by additives during processing.”

“Federal nutrition programs can play an important role in the nutritional quality of children’s diets and in reducing childhood obesity,” said James Weill, president of FRAC. “However, changes at the federal, state and district level need to be made to achieve these goals, and those changes include improvements in the commodity program. Solutions include increasing the amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables purchased by the federal government, providing more assistance to help states make good commodity choices and encouraging school districts to band together to maximize their buying power for healthier foods.”

The two studies noted that the USDA Child Nutrition Commodity Program provides more than 180 different food items, valued at about \$1 billion annually, for the nation’s school lunch programs, and that commodities provide approximately 20 percent of the food served in school lunches. The report offers federal and state policy recommendations for improving the nutritional quality of school meals based on the research, including:

- As stated in the 2004 legislation reauthorizing the Child Nutrition and WIC programs, align School Meal Initiative Standards with current Dietary Guidelines for Americans and ensure school meals—which are heavily based on federal commodity foods—are meeting these guidelines.
- Increase proportion and amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables purchased by the federal government for use in school lunch program.
- Implement nutrition guidelines for processors to align processed commodities with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

The report issued by CFPA and Samuels & Associates was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Healthy Eating Research program. Free access to the full text of both reports will be available online on September 9, 2008.

*The Impact of the Federal Child Nutrition Commodity Program on the Nutritional Quality of School Meals* at [www.cfpa.net/School\\_Food/commodities\\_full.pdf](http://www.cfpa.net/School_Food/commodities_full.pdf) and *Commodity Foods and the Nutritional Quality of the School Lunch Program: Historical Role, Current Operations, and Future Potential* at [www.frac.org/pdf/commodities08.pdf](http://www.frac.org/pdf/commodities08.pdf).

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*The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) is the leading national nonprofit organization working to improve public policies and public-private partnerships to*

*eradicate hunger and undernutrition in the United States.*

*California Food Policy Advocates is a statewide nutrition policy and advocacy organization whose mission is to improve the health and well-being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious, affordable food.*