

USA Pulses

Pulses in School Feeding Programs

White Paper

Overview

- National School Lunch Program meals reach about **30 million students** each school day and total nearly **5 billion lunches annually**, making cafeterias a major setting for nutrition exposure.
- Pulses are an **affordable** and **nutritious choice** for school meals but continue to be **under-served** and **under-consumed** amongst school-aged children.
- Pulses are a **unique** food because they provide **fiber and micronutrients** associated with vegetables while also contributing **plant-based protein**.
- Under current school meal regulations, pulses may be credited toward meeting meal pattern requirements as either a **vegetable** or a **meat/meat alternate**. Schools value this **flexibility** because it lets them use pulses across a wider range of meals.
- Pulses are built into weekly menu planning because USDA's school meal standards require **weekly minimums** for specific **vegetable subgroups**, including pulses. Under this, schools must offer at least **½ cup** from the "**Beans, Peas, and Lentils**" subgroup each week.
- Maintaining **the weekly vegetable subgroup minimums** ensures children are regularly exposed to pulses in cafeterias, helping make pulses a familiar and normal part of meals.
- As USDA updates school meal standards and related education materials, it is critical that pulses continue to be recognized as a **vegetable** and that the **vegetable subgroup structure** and **weekly minimum requirements** remain in place.

Our Ask

1. Direct **USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)** to maintain pulses' ability to be credited as either a **vegetable** or a **meat/meat alternate** in school meals.
2. Direct **USDA/FNS** to preserve the **vegetable subgroup structure** and **weekly minimum requirements** that support regular pulse offerings and exposure children to a variety of vegetables.
3. Direct **USDA/FNS/AMS** to expand pulse options on the **USDA Foods Available List (FAL)** to include all types of pulses, including dry peas and lentils.
4. Direct **USDA/FNS** to maintain **clear crediting guidance** that allows schools to use **pulses in multiple forms**, including nutrient-dense pulse-based ingredients and processed pulse products.

Background

School Meal Standards

- USDA school meal standards require weekly minimum amounts for five vegetable subgroups, including “Beans, Peas, and Lentils.”
- To meet the weekly vegetable subgroup requirements, schools must offer at least ½ cup of pulses each week.
- Under current school meal regulations, pulses may be credited toward meeting meal pattern requirements as either a vegetable or a meat/meat alternate, depending on how they are menu planned and served.

NSLP Weekly Vegetable Requirements			
Vegetable Meal Components	Minimum per week		
	Grades K-5	Grades 6-8	Grades 9-12
Dark Green Subgroup	½ cup	½ cup	½ cup
Red/Orange Subgroup	¾ cup	¾ cup	1 ¼ cup
Beans, Peas, Lentils Subgroup	½ cup	½ cup	½ cup
Starchy Vegetables Subgroup	½ cup	½ cup	½ cup
Other Vegetables Subgroup	½ cup	½ cup	¾ cup

Why the 2025-3030 Dietary Guidelines Matter Now

- The Dietary Guidelines inform USDA’s updates to school meal standards.
- In the new 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines, pulses are presented more prominently alongside protein foods in consumer-facing materials, which can make their vegetable role less clear during implementation unless USDA guidance continues to recognize pulses as a vegetable within the vegetable subgroup framework.
- As USDA translates the Dietary Guidelines into updated standards and guidance, implementation details will shape whether pulses remain routinely included as part of weekly vegetable offerings.

USDA Foods Available List

- The USDA Foods Available List (FAL) is a major procurement channel for schools and can shape what is practical to serve consistently across districts.
- Only beans and chickpeas are currently available for schools on the FAL, lentils and dry peas are not included.
- As USDA updates school meal standards and guidance, USDA FAL offerings should be expanded to include all types of pulses so schools can have more options to meet weekly menu planning needs.

Pulse Products and Processing

- The 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines caution consumers to limit “highly processed” vegan or vegetarian foods.
- That message should not be interpreted to restrict pulse-based foods in schools when products meet school meal nutrition standards and support menu planning needs.
- USDA should maintain clear crediting guidance that allows schools to use pulses in multiple forms, including whole pulses and pulse-based ingredients and products used in school meals.

Pulses are a Nutrient-Dense Solution

- Pulse crops are unique and affordable foods that can fill nutrient gaps in U.S. diets while providing satiety between meals.
- One serving (1/2 cup) of cooked pulses offers:
 - An excellent source of dietary fiber
 - An excellent source of folate
 - A good source of protein
 - A good source of iron (most pulses)
 - A good source of potassium
 - Calcium, magnesium, choline, and zinc
- Pulses are low in fat/sodium and are free from the top 9 allergens.
- Pulse crops are low-carbon crops due to their ability to fix nitrogen and improve soil quality while requiring low water usage.