

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

No more cheese for school lunches

Just when USDA runs out of cheese for school lunches, a consumer group says it's bad for kids. Coincidence?

Over the summer, the U.S. Department of Agriculture made it official that there would be no more government cheese available for the school lunch programs until further notice.

Since 1974, the USDA has distributed cheese and other commodities, such as butter, beef, pork, eggs, and flour, to school districts and to government institutions (prisons, nutrition programs), and to food assistance for the needy. The food distribution is handled by the Commodities Credit Corporation.

Now, thanks to the past few years of federal policies to drastically reduce milk output, and reduce the size of the national milk cow inventory, there are no government stocks left for food assistance.

An estimated 24 million children participated in the school lunch programs last year. Half of these came from low-income families, and for them, the daily school lunch is an important part of their diet. School nutritionists have scrambled to try to make up for the loss of the cheese—a high-quality source of calories and minerals—but the immediate impact is to drive up the price of the lunches, and to reduce the number of children who can afford them.

Timed to coincide with the opening of schools in September, on Aug. 30 a Washington, D.C.-based consumer advocacy group, the Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, released a report saying that school lunches have too much fat in them and that the chief blame lay on the commodities distributed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In other

words, you are supposed to get the message that cheese, pork, beef, eggs, butter, and the other vital foods subsidized for school lunches are bad for your children.

The specious argument presented by the Public Voice report is that a survey they took of school lunch administrators in 36 states presented a majority opinion that if there is a problem of fatty lunches, then this results from the schools' reliance on government commodities.

In opposition to this survey, the American School Food Service Association gave a press conference in which its executive director, Pat Bayer, said, "In our viewpoint, fat is not an issue." She cited the record of success of schools in providing well-balanced meals.

The Public Voice report asserted that school lunches have on average 39% fat, when what the report calls "scientific consensus" for appropriate levels of fat is no more than 30%. Public Voice spokesman Ellen Haas told reporters, "Kids are definitely at risk from eating too much fat in their diets."

A survey of recent medical opinion does not uphold the nutritional assertions of the Public Voice. The American Academy of Pediatrics, for example, has recently set the acceptable level of fat for children's diets at the 30-40% range.

Calories from fat are important for energy, bone building, and in the earliest months of life, for building the central nervous system.

In one example of well-intentioned nutritional stupidity, a number of well-to-do parents in Long Island,

New York, were found to be feeding their children such extreme diets of "health foods"—raw vegetables, whole grain flatbreads, etc.—that their family doctors diagnosed the children as suffering from malnutrition. As a result, some Long Island pediatricians bought radio time for public service announcements to encourage parents to keep feeding their children "cookies and milk" and other such traditional "kid stuff," in order to give them access to a full balance of nutrients in their diets.

The loss of the cheese to school districts has placed great strain on their budgets. Suburban Washington, D.C. is typical. In the counties of surrounding Virginia and Maryland, school lunch prices have gone up from 5¢ to 30¢ a meal as a result of the loss of the cheese, and because of other increased costs, especially higher costs of food resulting from last year's drought. The American School Food Service Association estimates that for every penny that the price of school lunch increases, there can be an approximate drop of 1% in participation.

USDA cheese will also be cut from other food assistance programs such as food banks' distribution to the needy and Meals-on-Wheels programs. Besides cheese, the USDA is also out of milk powder—a very convenient and nutritious food product for world food relief.

The USDA cupboard is bare because of the recent years of federal milk reduction policies. The mid-1980s milk "PIK"—payment-in-kind—paid the dairy farmer \$10 for every 100 pounds of milk he did not produce over a specified period of months. Next came the Dairy Herd Termination Program, in which the dairy farmer was offered payment for eliminating his herd (slaughtering or exporting), and pledging not to go back to dairying for at least five years.