

# TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

TODD STAPLES  
COMMISSIONER



May 15, 2010

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your commitment to promoting healthy futures for all of our nation's citizens. We appreciate your continued focus on nutrition and hunger issues. By providing responsible administration of our federal programs, you are ensuring those who are most vulnerable have access to consistent and nutritious meals as they move toward becoming self-sufficient.

As Congress moves forward to reauthorizing these important programs, there are some critical components we have identified that are essential to the health and well being of our nation's children. I write today to call these to your attention and respectfully ask your partnership in three critical areas.

First, I request federal policy remain supportive of the progress Texas has made and not turn back this progress by requiring another set of standards with which to comply. Texas has been a leader in improving the quality of food served to schoolchildren. Over the past five years, we have implemented the Texas Public School Nutrition Policy (TPSNP), increasing nutrition standards for school meals and competitive foods, and eliminating access to carbonated beverages and candy during the school day. This has been a difficult transition for many school administrators and it has been successful in large part because of the careful, stakeholder-led implementation process. Texas' policy could be a model to follow if national standards are changed. This will ease the added burden on schools in a state that has led the nation on this front.

Second, I request your assistance in pursuing comprehensive approaches to our nation's obesity and hunger challenges. Higher nutritional standards are important, but I am convinced without a direct association of all necessary components we will not see the results that are essential to a healthy nation. Your administration has shown a strong interest in this; however, recent USDA changes in legal interpretation, despite precedent, have hampered our mutually sought goals.

As I travel across Texas, I often speak about the "3E's of Healthy Living – Education, Exercise and Eating Right." Improving health requires a complementary strategy. Our federal programs must not only promote food security and nutrition, but must also include the flexibility to support efforts to improve health through strategies like targeted education about the importance of making healthy choices and exercising. Teaching these values to children at an early age will help them maintain higher-quality lifestyles and reduce healthcare expenses associated with the treatment of preventable diseases associated with obesity.



Exercise is a component of the 3E's of Healthy Living, so I am encouraged by the promise the First Lady's Let's Move initiative holds for our future generations. However, no matter how tight we make the regulations on nutritious meals, we will never win the war on obesity until we teach our kids the value of healthy eating and physical activity decisions. Therefore, we must incorporate the flexibility for state administering agencies to use program funding to include these activities in our overall strategies if we are to have the impact on healthy lifestyles that is needed. For years prior to my election as Texas Commissioner of Agriculture, USDA allowed Texas to invest program dollars in these education and outreach activities. This changed in 2007, and I request your assistance in correcting this change.

Third, Texas has identified a significant impediment to its efforts on increasing food security. Therefore, I request your assistance in correlating the rates of reimbursement for child nutrition programs with the rising costs of food and fuel. Providing healthier meals and snacks is a priority for both the Texas Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and greater flexibility to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables is needed.

I know two of these requests partially involve Congressional action and I ask for your partnership in accomplishing those legislative improvements. Thank you again for your leadership on these critical issues. I stand ready to partner with you to ensure all our programs continue to be administered efficiently and responsibly.

Sincerely yours,



Todd Staples

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