United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 2, 2014

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We remain troubled by the Department's decision to exclude fresh white potatoes from the final rule amending the food packages in the Special Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC). This decision is not based on the most current Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), and the Department's explanation of the justification for that exclusion remains unsatisfactory.

In an explanation provided by USDA on February 28, 2014, to the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies, the Department detailed how it drew heavily on a 2005 Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommendation as justification for the exclusion of fresh white potatoes. The IOM committee based the white potato restriction on the vegetable consumption recommendations of the outdated 2005 DGA.

In January 2011, USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published an updated DGA utilizing current data on nutritional needs and consumption patterns. This most recent DGA recommends increased consumption – from three cups per week to five cups per week for a 2,000-calorie diet – of a category of vegetables that includes fresh white potatoes. Unfathomably, the USDA did not base its final rule for WIC food packages on the most recent dietary guidelines, which reflect the latest science.

In the introduction to the 2010 DGA, you and HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius write that "based on the most recent scientific evidence review, this document provides information and advice for choosing a healthy eating pattern-namely, one that focuses on nutrient-dense foods…" We believe that this is exactly what the DGA is supposed to do and expect that the information and advice contained therein to be incorporated into the WIC program. The 2010 DGA recommends that individuals "choose foods that provide more potassium, [and] dietary fiber," highlighting them as nutrients of concern. Not only are these nutrients readily available in fresh white potatoes, but potatoes are a cholesterol-free, fat-free and sodium-free food. A 110-calorie medium baked potato contains 15 percent of the recommended daily value of dietary fiber, 27 percent of the recommended daily value for vitamin B6, 28 percent of the recommended daily value of Vitamin C, and more potassium than a banana.

Aside from the overall healthfulness of the potato and its role as a nutrient-dense, affordable vegetable, other glaring inconsistencies in the implementation of this rule remain. For example, potatoes grown for sale in a supermarket are not available for purchase using WIC fresh fruit and

vegetable vouchers. Those same potatoes, however, are eligible for purchase using the vouchers in the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. We find it troubling that programs with the same ultimate mission would unnecessarily apply inconsistent scientific standards. With these facts and the most recent DGAs in place, we ask you to explain why the Department chose to utilize the outdated IOM report in crafting the final WIC rule.

While we note the Department's decision to expedite its regular review of WIC in recognition of the expectation of Congress to include all varieties of fresh vegetables in the food package, we urge you to take immediate action to remedy the unwarranted exclusion of white potatoes in the WIC food package in light of more recent science.

Sincerely,

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator

Mark Udall
United States Senator

John Cornyn
United States Senator

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

Mike Crapo
United States Senator

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

Deb Fischer
United States Senator

Maria Cantwell
United States Senator

John Hoeven
United States Senator

Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senator

Mike Johanns
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Ron Johnson
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Jerry Moran
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Angus S. King, Jr.
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Carl Levin
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Jeff Merkley
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Patty Murray
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Charles E. Schumer
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Debbie Stabenow
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