**Our Children and Farmers Deserve the Best from School Feeding Programs**

***“In the long view, no nation is any healthier than its children or more prosperous than its farmers” –***

**President Harry Truman**

*Upon signing the initial National School Lunch Act in 1946*

The two coequal goals of the original National School Lunch Act were to provide nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day AND to support U.S. farmers and ranchers. However, in the ensuing 71 years it appears that the second coequal goal of supporting U.S. farmers and ranchers has increasingly been lost as more schools look to purchase lower cost foreign-sourced food products.

According to the latest statistics, schools participating in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs receive nearly $8 billion annually in food products purchased with U.S. tax dollars. This includes more than $1 billion in food products purchased directly by USDA and more than $6.8 billion of U.S. tax dollars spent by school districts. Food purchased directly by USDA for school feeding programs is required to be 100% American-sourced. The Buy American requirement for direct school food purchases has been a part of federal law since 1988. Yet, under current USDA regulations, individual school districts can bypass the existing “Buy American” requirement and purchase imported food products from anywhere in the world if they believe there is a significant cost differential between domestic and imported food products.

Sacramento rightly calls itself the Farm to Fork Capitol, yet many California school districts are buying food grown halfway around the world with taxpayer funds while our farmers and local food processors supply the very same products. For example, did you realize that virtually all the apple juice being served in schools today comes from China? Did you know that Chinese canned peaches have been purchased by schools in more than 25 states? Were you aware that over 30 California school locations purchased frozen Egyptian strawberries last fall which were subject to recall over potential Hepatitis A infection? Did you know that over half of the fish sticks being served in schools today are using fish caught by Russian trawlers which are then processed in China (in some cases using North Korean workers with some of their earnings used to support the North Korean government) before being distributed in the U.S. market?

A July, 2017 report by the California State Auditor revealed that the California Department of Education has not been taking the appropriate steps to ensure that California schools are complying with the existing Federal Buy American requirements for school food purchases. In a review of six California school districts (Elk Grove, Fresno, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and Stockton), the audit showed that none of the schools had adequate policies and procedures in place relating to the Buy American requirement.

After the audit results drew widespread media attention, it appears that this issue is finally generating an increasing amount of legislative action. Last month, Governor Jerry Brown signed SB730 into law, a measure authored by Dr. Richard Pan (D-Sacramento) and supported by a large number of ag organizations including Ag Council of California, California Farm Bureau Federation, and the California Canning Peach Association, which establishes steps to be taken by the California Department of Education to ensure that schools are complying with the existing Federal Buy American provision.

However, the California school findings are not an outlier so the problem must also be addressed at the Federal level. Dr. Katie Wilson is an expert on child nutrition issues and supports the ongoing “Buy American” effort on school food purchases. She previously served as the Deputy Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services at USDA from 2015-2017. She notes “As foreign-sourced foods continue to find their way into school cafeterias, we must strengthen the current Buy American regulation to eliminate loopholes being used to substitute foreign-sourced food products in our nation’s schools.” Congressmen John Garamendi and Doug LaMalfa (along with 17 other cosponsors) have recently introduced H.R. 1241 to strengthen the monitoring and enforcement of the Buy American provision for school food purchases.

California’s farmers and producers work hard every day to grow and produce safe, healthy food products while implementing environmentally-friendly stewardship practices. California grown food is produced under the strictest regulations to ensure food safety, reduce environmental impacts, carefully manage pesticide use, conserve our water resources, and protect the health of our workers while providing the highest farm wages in the nation. Spending taxpayer dollars to source cheaper food products for our students that are grown and processed under very different standards does not reflect our nation’s policy priorities and is extraordinarily discouraging to all of us in the agricultural community who work so hard to comply with our rigorous standards. Why should schools risk the health and safety of our children for the sake of saving a few dollars on their food expenditures? It seems obvious that President Truman had it right over 70 years ago – the best way to ensure that our kids have safe, nutritious food at school is to support U.S. farmers and ranchers.