

Congress: Tomato paste on school pizzas counts as a veggie

By Mary Clare Jalonick, Huffington Post

WASHINGTON – Congress wants to keep pizza and French fries on school lunch lines, fighting back against an Obama administration proposal to make school lunches healthier.

The final version of a spending bill released late Monday would unravel school lunch standards the Agriculture Department proposed earlier this year, which included limiting the use of potatoes on the lunch line and delaying limits on sodium and delaying a requirement to boost whole grains.

The bill also would allow tomato paste on pizzas to be counted as a vegetable, as it is now. USDA had wanted to prevent that.

Food companies that produce frozen pizzas for schools, the salt industry and potato growers requested the changes, and some conservatives in Congress say the federal government shouldn't be telling children what to eat.

Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee said the changes would “prevent overly burdensome and costly regulations and to provide greater flexibility for local school districts to improve the nutritional quality of meals.”

School districts had said some of the USDA requirements went too far and cost too much when budgets are extremely tight. Schools have long taken broad instructions from the government on what they can serve in federally subsidized meals that are served free or at reduced price to low-income children. But some schools have balked at government attempts to tell them exactly what foods they can't serve.

Reacting to that criticism, House Republicans had urged USDA to completely rewrite the standards in their version of the bill passed in June. The Senate last month voted to block the potato limits in their version. Neither version included the language on tomato paste, sodium or whole grains, which was added by House-Senate negotiators on the bill.

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