

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 6, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to request that you implement the recommendations included in the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report titled *National School Lunch Program: USDA Could Enhance Assistance to States and Schools in Providing Seafood to Students (GAO-23-105179)*.

Millions of students across the nation rely on the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) for food security and critical nutrition. In fact, during the school year, participating students receive nearly two-thirds of their daily calories from school meals. The reliance on school meals mandates that the NSLP provide healthy, well balanced meals to ensure students receive the nutrients they need for a healthy diet. However, students participating in the NSLP may be missing out on the benefits of a balanced diet that includes nutritious and high-protein seafood.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that school age children consume between 4 and 10 ounces of seafood per week. Yet the average student participating in the NSLP receives only 3.4 ounces of USDA-purchased seafood in an entire fiscal year. While USDA provides great flexibility in meeting its school meal nutrition requirements, there is an opportunity for USDA to provide additional support to school food authorities (SFAs) that would help increase the availability of seafood, particularly locally-sourced seafood, in school meals.


According to the GAO, there are several factors limiting state and SFA seafood purchases. Some of these hurdles, like limits on the types of seafood available through USDA and a lack of knowledge in preparing and serving seafood, could be addressed by USDA. While USDA's Strategic Plan aims "to ensure that schools... have the resources and flexibility to serve top-quality, healthy, and appealing meals," the Department does not have a plan to address the specific factors limiting seafood consumption in schools. As such, we urge you to follow the GAO recommendation and develop a plan that will increase USDA assistance to states and SFAs in providing seafood to students through the NSLP.

Furthermore, we urge you to enter into a formal agreement with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to facilitate the sharing of information on domestic seafood vendors. NOAA is willing to share its list of domestic seafood vendors and USDA has acknowledged that this information would help enhance outreach to seafood vendors for

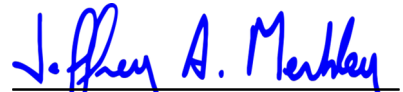
participation in the NSLP, potentially helping USDA to increase the variety of, and decrease the cost of, USDA-purchased seafood.

Thank you for considering these requests. Please do not hesitate to reach out to our offices if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,



Jack Reed
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator